

Alex Woolf  
1998

# Conversion and Christianity in the North Sea World

The proceedings of a Day Conference  
held on 21st February 1998

Edited by  
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Published by  
The Committee for Dark Age Studies  
University of St Andrews

ISBN 0-9512573-3-1

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Designed and typeset by Reprographic Services,  
University of St Andrews

ST ANDREWS  
St John's House Papers No 8  
1998

Conversion  
and  
Christianity

**Preface**

Barbara E. Crawford

**Chapter 1**

Conversion and Politics on the eastern seaboard of Britain:  
Some Archaeological Indicators

**Martin Carver**

page 11

**Chapter 2**

Pictland, Northumbria and the Carolingian Empire

**Raymond Lamb**

page 41

**Chapter 3**

The Hallowhill and the Origins of Christianity in Scotland

**Edwina Proudfoot**

page 57

**Chapter 4**

Pilgrims to St Ethernan: the Archaeology of an  
Early Saint of the Picts and Scots

**Peter Yeoman**

page 75

**Chapter 5**

Carolingian Northumbria and the Legatine Mission of 786

**J.E. Story**

page 93

**Chapter 6**

History and Archaeology: the Conversion of Scandinavia

**Lesley Abrams**

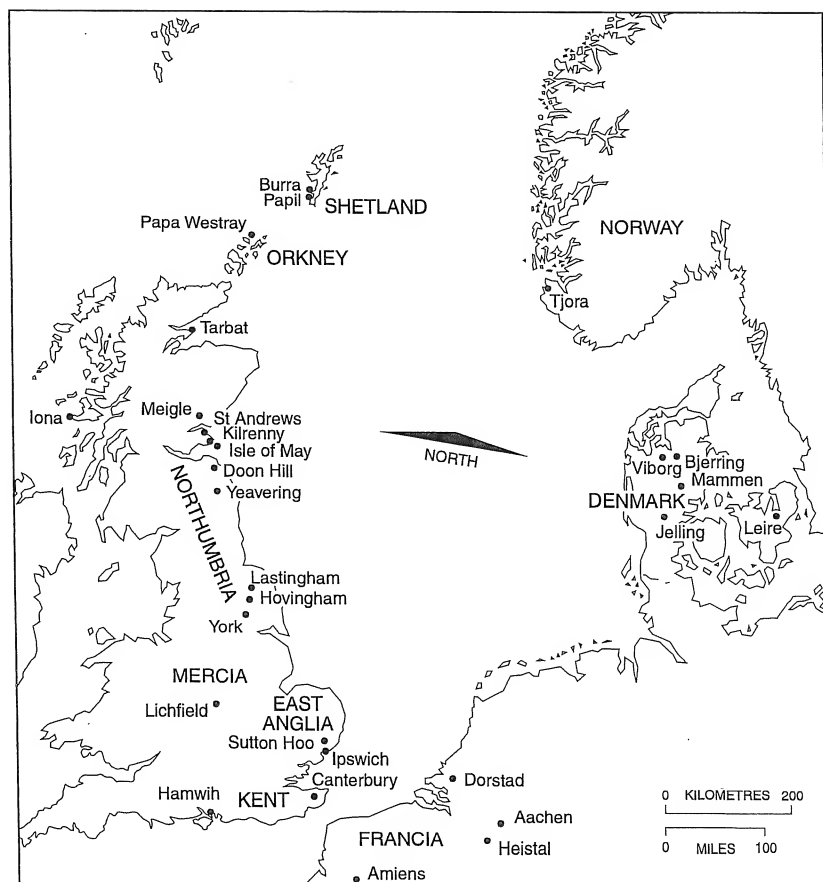
page 109

**Chapter 7**

Christianization of Early Medieval Societies:  
an Anthropological Perspective

**Przemysław Urbanczyk**

page 129



The North Sea World showing places mentioned in the text

## Frontispiece

Map of The North Sea World

## Chapter 1

Illus.1.1. p.17

The Sutton Hoo Site under excavation in 1988

Illus.1.2. p.18

Plan of the Sutton Hoo cemetery

Illus.1.3 a) and  
b). p.25

Maps of sites with a) pre-and b) post-Viking sculpture  
in the East Riding of Yorkshire

Illus.1.4. p.28

Map of Easter Ross, with sites referred to in the text

Illus.1.5. p.31

Plan of the Tarbat site with excavated features

Illus.1.6. p.31

Tarbat under excavation in 1995

Illus.1.7. p.32

Preliminary phase plan of St. Colman's (Tarbat Old  
Church), Portmahomack

Illus.1.8. p.34

Both faces of the 'Monk Stone', TR20, drawn and  
reconstructed

Illus.1.9. p.36

Grave markers and other carved stones from Tarbat  
with comparative pieces from Iona

## Chapter 2

Illus. 2.1. p.51

Pictish stone from Meigle ( 5 rev.) showing horseman  
trotting (RCAHMS)

Illus. 2.2. p.52

Illustration of the extended trot from Eisenberg 1727  
(By permission of the Trustees of the NLS)

Illus. 2.3. p.53

Pictish stone from Meigle (26) showing man with  
beast following (RCAHMS)

Illus. 2.4. p.54

Pictish stone from Meigle (27) showing sitting figure  
behind man on a tilted chair (RCAHMS)

### Chapter 3

- Illus. 3.1. p.58 'St Columba preaching to the Picts' by William Hole
- Illus. 3.2. a) and b) p.60 The Class II Pictish Stone from Dunfallandy, Perthshire
- Illus. 3.3. p.63 Plan of the main excavated features at the Hallow Hill long cist cemetery
- Illus. 3.4. p.64 The Hallow Hill long cist cemetery during excavation
- Illus. 3.5. p.66 Aerial view of the Hallow Hill
- Illus. 3.6. p.68 Map of distribution of long cists, *egles* place names and inscribed stones

### Chapter 4

- Illus. 4.1. p.76 Location maps of the Isle of May and monastery site (Fife Council)
- Illus. 4.2. p.80 Plan of excavations on the Isle of May, completed in 1996. (Fife Council)
- Illus. 4.3. p.82 Excavating the long-cist cemetery (Fife Council)
- Illus. 4.4. p.84 Simplified phase plan of the churches (Fife Council)
- Illus. 4.5. p.86 Overall view of the church site from west to east (Fife Council)

### Chapter 6

- Illus. 6.1. p.117 Drawing of wax candle from the Mammen burial
- Illus. 6.2. p.120 The Bjerring rune stone
- Illus. 6.3. p.1272 The Tjora cross
- Front Cover** The 'dragon' face of the 'Monk Stone' (TR20) from Tarbat, Easter Ross
- Back Cover** Drawing of the 'monk' face (TR20) from Tarbat, Easter Ross

The Fourth St Andrews Day Conference focussed on a theme which was rather different from the previous three (*Scotland in Dark Age Europe*, 1994; *Scotland in Dark Age Britain*, 1996; *The Uses of Place-Names*, 1998): it was the processes involved in the change to Christianity which occurred throughout the North Sea world in the centuries from c.500 AD to c.1100 AD, with particular respect to the the eastern seaboard of Britain. The aim was once again to attempt a better understanding of a significant development in the history of Scotland by embracing the wider geographical background, and this time the specific maritime world of the North Sea. Contacts along the eastern seaboard and across the southern North Sea were basic to the development of Christian beliefs and the structure of Christian worship in Pictland. This southern and eastern focus was deliberately chosen in contrast to the western, Irish and Columban element in Scotland's Christianity, which had been centre stage in historians' thinking in the past year's Columban commemoration celebrations. The western element becomes of course a very important strand in Scotland's Christian development, but before the ninth-century spread of Gaelic culture eastwards the links with post-Roman culture and the Northumbrian world to the south were very relevant to the Picts' change of religion.

Links with the powerful imperial and royal polities to the south were focussed on in particular by Raymond Lamb and Jo Story. In his study of Pictland, Northumbria and the Carolingian Empire Dr. Lamb uses his exceptional knowledge of the situation in the Northern Isles to postulate the imposition of a Roman, Northumbrian style of ecclesiastical organisation at the northern end of the eastern seaboard. Dr. Story shows how important was Frankish involvement in the papal mission of 786 to the courts of three Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, demonstrating the value of surviving documentary record for what it reveals of the cultural influence which extended northwards from the Carolingian court. Archaeology's contribution to our better understanding of such influences, and the wide variety of material evidence was explained by three speakers, who displayed the remarkable discoveries of their own excavated sites on Scotland's eastern seaboard. The important long-cist cemetery at the Hallow Hill, St. Andrews, was shown by Edwina Proudfoot to be another example of the very earliest Christian burial practices which are known only in south and east Scotland (with scattered outliers in Moray and Orkney) and datable in this case to the seventh century continuing into the eighth.



Excavations at the monastic site on the Isle of May have produced similar long-cist burials from early Christian levels. Peter Yeoman's discussion of this important medieval pilgrimage centre, recorded as the place of St. Adrian's martyrdom by the Danes, have revealed that there were several very early churches ranging from the eighth to the eleventh centuries. The confusion of identity of the holy man whose foundation, or place of martyrdom formed the nucleus of this long-lived church and burial- place exemplifies the intangible nature of early Pictish Christianity. Irish monastic record and early inscription evidence tell us that his name was probably Ithernan/Ethernan rather than the later, latinised Adrian, and his cult was particularly localised in Fife and Buchan. Archaeology tells us of continuity of Christian worship at a cult site eventually brought into the main stream Roman monastic tradition by the twelfth-century Scottish kings.

The third archaeological site, currently under investigation, is located around St. Colman's Church at Tarbat in Easter Ross, central to the ecclesiastically-advanced province of the northern Picts, which has produced some remarkable fragments of sophisticated sculpture. Martin Carver started the Conference off with a challenging paper devoted to 'Conversion and Politics' not only on the eastern seaboard, but also in North Europe and Scandinavia. Ranging over the material messages of archaeology and how to interpret them, changes in burial practice and the meaning of dramatic pagan cemeteries such as Sutton Hoo, different kinds of religious church establishments and the impact of the Vikings in northern England, he took us finally to Tarbat itself and the problems raised by the sculptural evidence from this historically-unrecorded putative monastic centre. The origins or cultural connections evidenced by these finds do not lie in one particular direction and perhaps serve as a warning that influences and impulses from without may not always be as important as researchers like to imagine.

Moving away from the eastern seaboard Lesley Abrams took us to the other side of the North Sea, where the arrival of Christianity produced its own particular conversion story. The context of the Viking Age and the far-reaching contacts of the Scandinavian raiders and traders provides the wide range of diverse cultures from which influences must have arrived into the home countries, but she argues that more structured missionising activity was required; and not until the kings themselves were converted and brought in

priests under their protection, did Christianity take root. Despite the later date at which this happened (compared with the eastern seaboard of Britain), it is an event which is not adequately recorded and archaeology forms as important a body of evidence as it does for the earlier conversion. The difficulties of interpreting the burial evidence, the church buildings, the sculpture and the inscriptions forms a reflective mirror image of similar problems produced by the early British material, albeit of quite a different character.

The question of local characteristics or general perspectives was raised by Przemyslaw Urbanczyk in the concluding 'Anthropological Perspective'. His summary analysis of the features of European pagan societies compared with the universalist, structured Christian religion taught by institutionalised administrators sharpened awareness of the theoretical framework of the Conference theme. It stimulated the following general discussion about the meaning of conversion, which, it became clear, means many things to many people; as it probably meant many things to those in the past who were caught up in the changing nature of their society's beliefs. This was a timely note to end on, after the wealth of historical and archaeological detail which we had learned about, and which told us about the external features of the momentous events which affected all the societies around the North Sea in the early centuries of our era. The internal change of heart and mind is something which we can only speculate about.

Once again, I would like to thank the members of the Committee for Dark Age Studies in the University of St. Andrews, and EMERGE (Early Medieval Research Group Edinburgh) for their help in making this Fourth Dark Age Studies Conference another successful event. Particular thanks are due again to Professor Graeme Whittington for his management of technical facilities at the Purdie Building and arrangements for access. The Vice-Principal, Professor Colin Vincent, kindly made everyone welcome and provided the customary glass of wine at lunchtime. The School of History gave financial support as did the University of St Andrews Gibson-Sykora Fund for Polish exchanges.

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## Conversion and Politics on the Eastern Seaboard of Britain; some archaeological indicators.

Martin Carver

We ought to begin by asking a hard question about the nature of Christianity in the second half of the first millennium: is it a set of private beliefs, acquired through conviction, or a political programme, imposed through coercion? As we have seen with Communism in our own day, one thing can easily lead to the other and it is not easy to draw a line between them. But if this distinction is obscure in our century, to discern ideological motivations 1000 years ago is obviously more difficult still. The evidence from documents is heavily weighted towards Christianity and the higher ranks of society. Devotional matter is not excluded, but rarely tells us about why personal convictions changed. On the other hand, as Richard Fletcher points out in his vivid account of the *Conversion of Europe*, the language of conversion is largely political rather than persuasive in character: those who convert have *accepted* the faith, or *yielded* to it or *submitted* to it (1997, 64, 99, 209-210, 237). He reminds us that when the Franks extended their domination east of the Rhine, 'not for the first, nor by any means the last time, secular imperialism and Christian evangelism went hand in hand' (*ibid*, 150). Both force of argument and force of arms were used, and we are left in little doubt that the conversion of Europe was also a conquest. Unfortunately we know little about the success of Pagan resistance and practically nothing about the anti-Christian argument, since the history was written by the winners. But I like to think that Pagan politics was possessed of considerably more intellectual rationale than even modern historians are normally willing to grant it.

### Can archaeology track conversion?

Material culture has messages of its own to impart, but there is still room for dispute over exactly what they are. We can now recognise the date and function of a wide range of fragments of settlements and cemeteries in the first millennium, and it has become a relatively uncontentious assertion that indications of economy and social organisation can be drawn from them. But the detection of ideology, what people believed and how they thought, is less routine. Knowledge of Christian liturgy and symbolism allows some identifications to be confidently made on the ground. Cruciform equal-armed

or apsidal or narrow-ended stone buildings can be assumed to be Christian churches, especially when aligned east-west. Rectangular buildings underneath churches are also often assumed to be primitive churches, although an open verdict might be more correct. Memorial stones carrying crosses and certain other insignia are thought to indicate sponsorship in a Christian context. Portable objects similarly marked tell us little about the affiliations of the user, but indicate that they were supplied by a manufacturer working for a Christian clientele.

Since the symbolic repertoire of the *pagan* party is not decoded for us in documents as helpfully as the Christian, we are obliged to identify the diagnostic material by deduction, favouring symbols and practices which were prevalent in pre-Christian times but not later (see below). But we must at least start from the premise that the pagan position was as intelligently and fiercely argued as the Christian. The fact that pagan ideology was not written down does not entitle us to say that their policies and beliefs were vague, half-hearted, non-existent or 'savage' (cf Hodges 1989, 43). Passion for Christian ideas surely indicates a *pre-existing* capacity for intellectual passion, not a child-like blank space on which evangelists could write their convictions. There is no evidence that Christians taught the peoples of the north how to think as well as how to write. There is surely a pagan mind, with its own cosmology, moral code and political programme, just as there was a Christian mind. And to have an insight on how this mind was changed during the process of conversion is an exciting goal, which remains important to us today. One way, perhaps even the only way of doing it, is through material culture - the medium that both minds shared. But to get at the mind of the converted by means of archaeology is, on the face of it, a tall order.

Modern philosophy has encouraged us to believe that material culture is a form of self-expression, like writing. But like writing, it is not all equally revealing of its author's thoughts. Some data, such as the contents of midden heaps, can be treated as unconstructed *obiter jecta*, and used analytically to make models of social and economic systems. But others, such as furnished graves, can be seen as having *intention*, the objects of deliberate investment and suitable vehicles for self-expression. Other measurables, such as the use of space within settlements, and the hierarchy of settlements, can be inspired by ecological, economic or ideological factors, but the balance between these imperatives may be uncertain. It is probably safe to use buildings as indicators

of ideology only when it is clear that they are monumental, that is, self-expressive in intention.

It is worth trying to establish a basis for discrimination between different types of cultural material, because unless there are a few ground rules every attempt to read messages in terms of ideology or politics - which is what we need for a discussion of conversion - is destined to fall apart. If a first basis for discrimination is between function (monument or midden?), the second should be within the set of monuments, discriminating between levels of investment. In subjects of high investment, the expression of contemporary belief or political assertion is likely; while in those of low investment, insensitivity to the ideas-market and adherence to tradition is more probable. In other words, the lower the relative investment (something that can generally be assessed), the fewer new ideas are likely to be signified. The argument therefore goes like this: conversion is a change in ideology, that is, in the set of beliefs underpinning a political system. Ideology, and thus changes in ideology, are only safely observable in a small part of the cultural record: the part that is high in investment and monumental in function.

### Signals of non-Christian ideologies in the North Sea region

So armed we can approach the material culture of the pre-Christian peoples of the North Sea region and single out those subjects of high investment which also qualify as being monumental. The large timber *halls* that have been found, as at Lejre in seventh-century Denmark (Christensen 1991, 99), would have been impressive when standing, and redolent of the poetry of a heroic society at its feast. But such halls and such feasting are attributes of Christian societies too, as at Yeavering, dated from the sixth to the seventh centuries, mainly through association with documented kings, both Christian and pagan (Hope-Taylor 1977). The hall, which remains of course a feature of the later medieval aristocracy, indicates hierarchy, but not ideological allegiance. Similarly, the *beachmarket*, which also concentrates investment, is a feature of pre-Christian Scandinavia and begins there perhaps as early as the third century AD as at Lundeberg (Thomsen et al 1993, 71); but the system of control that it signals is adopted by Christian England at Ipswich and Hamwih. The differences between pre-Christian and Christian trading places need more study but we can at least say that it was not necessary to be Christian to open a 'gateway' settlement or 'emporium' (cf Hodges 1989, ch 4). Associated with halls, gold

and high investment are the votive-deposit centres at Gudme and Sorte Mulde. These also begin in the fifth century or before, and are labelled as ideological by the large number of gilded icons, the *guldgubbe*, that have been found there. These "sacred centres" (Nielsen et al 1993) are destined to become strong players in the history of early medieval Europe, and it can only be a matter of time before one such site makes an appearance somewhere along the east coast of Britain. But for the present they are hard to include in the British conversion story.

It is *burial* which provides the main vocabulary of belief in our study area, and burial rites certainly do change at conversion; not in every case, not all at once and not in every way, but they do change. Amongst the burials of high investment, there are at least three attributes which are found among people known not to be Christian, and which have not been found among people known to have been Christian; these are cremations, mounds and ship-burials. It is therefore reasonable to assume that these are signals of non-Christian belief. We are on less certain ground with the use of grave-goods and with orientation, both once thought to be reliable discriminators between Christian and pagan peoples. Orientation we can exclude anyway, since it does not require any investment. The general trend is undeniable: pre-Christian graves in our area are furnished and Christian graves are not. But the use of grave-goods as a non-Christian indicator has been under attack ever since the discovery of richly furnished burials in churches at Cologne and St Denis, and the realisation that many graves of non-Christian peoples are unfurnished. Bailly Young and others have sometimes taken the arguments to extremes, virtually claiming that the inclusion of grave-goods had no significance for ideology (Young 1977; but see now Young and others in Karkov, forthcoming).

It seems to me much safer to assume that a variation does have a meaning, even if we do not yet know what it is. We now have a wide range of burial practices around the North Sea, and a fair number of dates for them (Müller-Wille 1972, 1974, 1992, 1995, 1996). In seeking to give these different burials meaning, the key concepts to *abandon* are those of ethnicity and tradition. There is hardly a single burial rite at any level, and none at high levels of investment, which remains in continuous use anywhere in our region. Mound-burial, for example, appears in Britain and Denmark in the Bronze Age, in Central Europe in the early Iron Age; it reappears in Jutland in the first century, while in SW Norway (and probably eastern Scotland) it appears in the fifth, in

Kent in the sixth, in Swedish Mälaren and East Anglia in the seventh, in Slavic areas in the eighth, and in Norway and again in Denmark in the ninth. Ship-burial appears in East Anglia, Sweden, and Norway (but not Denmark) in the seventh century; and horse-burial follows a similarly erratic trajectory. Among the possible reasons for the adoption of mound-burial, an ethnic tradition may now be considered the least likely (Carver 1992).

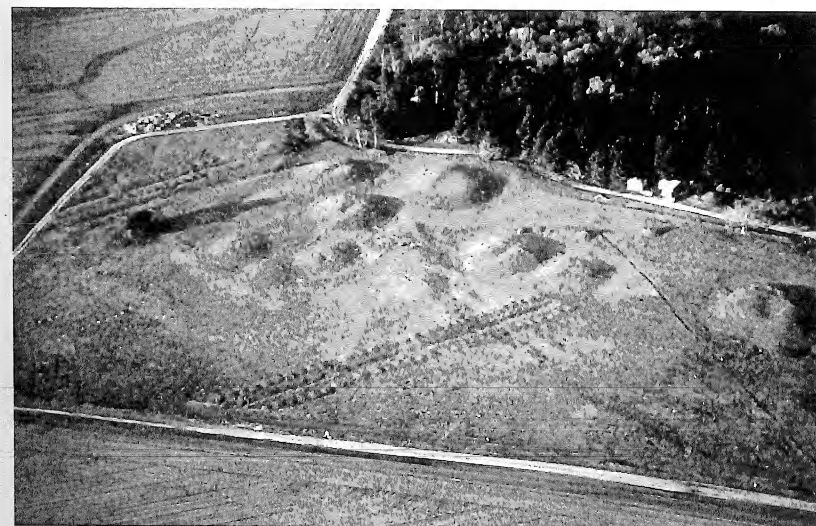
In eastern Britain, change in burial practice is more or less continuous. In the fifth and early sixth centuries, most graves are furnished with Germanic ornament and the observed hierarchy between them is slight. In the mid sixth to early seventh the hierarchy increases: many graves have no grave-goods, but there is investment in mound burials which are increasingly large and richly furnished. Mound-burial ceases abruptly in the early seventh century and there is gap of perhaps 50 years before furnishing begins again: not so much a 'final phase' as a *new* phase. Thanks to Helen Geake's analysis, we can now see the character of this late seventh-early eighth century revival of furnished burial: the objects show alignment with Rome and Byzantium. Then, from the mid eighth century, the furnishing of graves is practically unknown apart from isolated monumental gestures such as the re-furnishing of Cuthbert's coffin (Geake 1996).

It should be possible to use our criteria to distinguish the different kinds of message in this material. The increase in burial hierarchy during the sixth century reflects a change from kin-based to territory-based identity. The decrease in grave-goods reflects not so much the concentration of wealth into fewer hands (although this may have happened) as unequal access to the privilege of being able to bury part of one's inheritance. I have suggested (ultimately following Georges Duby) that the cessation of grave-goods is likely to be connected with the onset of centralised taxation; the "death duty" is now paid to church or crown to secure the acceptance of the dead in eternity, rather than spent on the tribal costume or *tracht* which would ensure acceptance among the supernatural folk (Carver 1989, 157). Absence of grave-goods in this period is thus a sign that the dead person belonged to a taxation regime, not that they were Christian, although the two no doubt became increasingly coincident. In burials of high investment, the rich burial mounds, we should expect an additional message, the political, to be proclaimed. As already pointed out, the burial mound is not used always anywhere, and we need on every occasion to seek a context for its adoption. Shepherd's work in England

showed that large cemeteries of small mounds appeared in mid to late sixth-century Kent; while large, generally isolated, mounds appeared outside Kent in the late sixth to early seventh century (Shepherd 1979). In the Rhineland, Böhme's analysis shows the mound appearing in the fifth century at the Rhine mouth and moving steadily upstream to appear in Switzerland by the eighth (Böhme 1993; Müller-Wille 1998). In both cases, the pattern seems to follow the frontier of Christian kingship. The burial mounds are not a tradition which Christianity encounters. They are spectacular demonstrations at a particular moment, extravagant investments and ritual re-inventions which Christianity is not suppressing, but provoking (Carver 1986, 99; Hodges 1989, 47). Much the same conclusion can be drawn from the English adoption of ship-burial, which does not happen until the seventh century, and a similar pattern might be anticipated for horse burial when more dated examples have been gathered (Müller-Wille 1972, 1974, 1995, Carver 1995; in addition to Sutton Hoo there have been recent finds of bridled horses at Snape and Lakenheath, both in Suffolk). High status burial, at least in early medieval Europe, is not customary but reactive; it depends on what else is going on. In this sense, the adoption and re-ification of demonstrative pagan symbolism is a sign of the perceived menace of a predatory ideology, in our case Christianity with its imperial ambitions.

### Resistance to Conversion in East Anglia

These ideas have been used to interpret the burial ground at Sutton Hoo and suggest its relation to the conversion of the English (Carver 1998 for the most recent summary). Sutton Hoo as we now understand it consists of 17 mound-burials and three small groups of peripheral burials. 10 mounds have been examined, of which 6 were found to be well-furnished cremations (Mounds 3-7 and 18), one was a horse-burial (Mound 17), one a chamber-grave for a rich female (Mound 14) and two were ship-burials (Mound 1 and 2). A group of burials (nos. 12, 15, 16 and 56) were poorly furnished graves, three of them probably of children or adolescents. Two groups of unfurnished graves were found: 16 burials situated around Mound 5 and closely associated with it; and a second group of 18 on the eastern periphery clustered around a post-setting (illus. 1.1, 1.2). Both of these groups contained examples of bodies which had been hanged, decapitated or dismembered, implying that both were places of execution. The dates of the richly furnished mound-burials rely on ornamental style and are placed very close together around the year 600 AD. The four



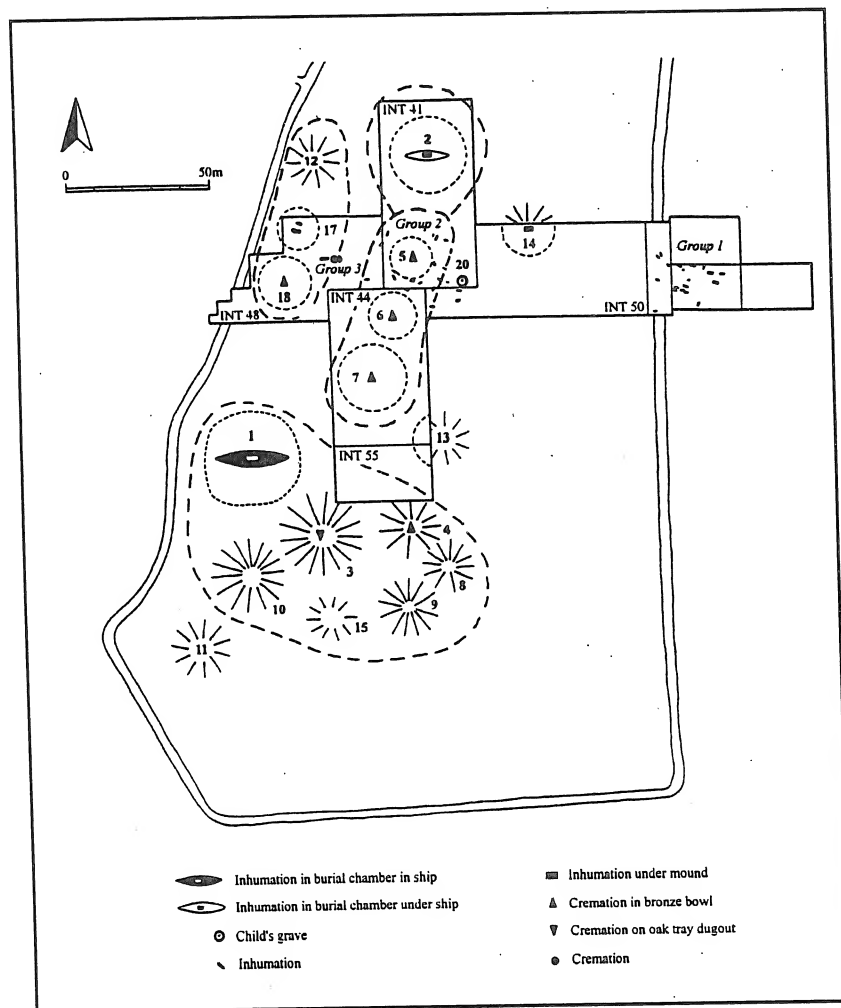
Illus. 1.1

The Sutton Hoo site under excavation in 1988  
(Cliff Hoppitt c. Sutton Hoo Research Trust; slide S1/39/25812)

poorly furnished graves are dated by objects and C14 dating to the seventh or eighth century. The execution burials are dated by C14 dating to the period from about 600 to about 1100 AD.

The relative wealth of Sutton Hoo and the conspicuous absence of fifth/sixth-century graves in a hectare of excavation, suggests that this was a special cemetery for the elite. It does not have to have been the only one; Stanley West's researches suggest that there may have been other rich burial mounds along the Deben, including at Rendlesham. There may have been a general movement by a new aristocracy away from folk cemeteries and towards more personal monuments in the early seventh century. But even so, the Sutton Hoo site is still the most prominent and largest example we have of these new 'upper class cemeteries'. Some of the people buried there might have been kings, in the sense used by Bede. If so, they would have been kings of East Anglia, since Sutton Hoo lies between Rendlesham, Ipswich and Felixstowe which were all sites in that territory. But not everyone buried at Sutton Hoo needs to have been a king; and some kings of East Anglia might have been buried elsewhere (Carver and Hummler, forthcoming).





Illus. 1.2  
Plan of the Sutton Hoo cemetery  
[ex Carver 1998]

Recent research has also demonstrated that the settlement pattern changes, at the same time as the cemeteries. Dispersed farmsteads of the West Stow type are superseded by nucleated, 'manorial' centres, which have facilities for storing and processing surplus produce, like Wicken Bonhunt (Essex). These new centres quickly acquire churches. It is not clear whether this new landscape structure, with its intimations of taxation, pre-echoed Christianity, or was a consequence of conversion. But in East Anglia, we are at least now justified in saying that the documented conversion was coincident with a radical reorganisation of the way that agricultural resources were exploited and people lived. We could go further and say that this re-organisation was in favour of the aristocracy, probably related to new formalized estates and new methods of drawing tribute from them and it perhaps represented some loss of liberty among the farmers (Carver 1989).

Sutton Hoo was the subject of high investment and, as an execution site, had a role in the exercise of power. What ideology was being signalled? Cremation under a mound was well established in seventh-century Scandinavia - but new to Britain. Burial in small boats appeared in Bornholm in the fifth century, but in Britain only in the seventh (at Snape). Burial in a full-sized ship (ie 20m or more in length) is new to both Britain and Scandinavia in the seventh (Carver 1995). We are not therefore dealing with the tail-end of a tradition, but with the expression of ideas in novel form, and the message proclaims a strong empathy between East Anglia and Scandinavia. Inside Mound 1 we are even more aware of the novelty and invention in the assemblage: the sceptre and the standard emphasise that we are in the presence of a particular historical conjunction, not a repetitious custom. Christian insignia are carried on some objects, but these objects are all silverware manufactured in Constantinople at the hub of the Christian empire, and the insignia can hardly be held to imply that either the dead or the people who buried them had any Christian leanings.

Remembering that the dead do not bury themselves, it would be hard to see how a more convincing demonstration of an anti-Christian position could be devised. A burial, I have tried to argue elsewhere, is a poem, and has to be deconstructed in the same way as a poem; it is a palimpsest of allusions, in which private hopes and fears are interwoven with the current anxieties of the international situation. It reveals both the corporate and the personal agenda of the members of the burial party, and constitutes the fossilisation, in a monument, of a political viewpoint (Carver, forthcoming). Fletcher (1997, 125) comments

of Sutton Hoo that 'the burial rite may have been traditional, but that does not make it pagan'. This statement is the wrong way round, I believe: the burial rites adopted at Sutton Hoo were not traditional to the English and were selected from a demonstrably pagan repertoire. My view of Sutton Hoo is that it represents an experiment in pagan kingship, undertaken in emulation of the kingship being provoked by Christianity, but at the same time rejecting Christianity's pan-European imperial programme. The aim was to achieve a territorial kingdom and trade advantages with the European market, without giving up the principles of intellectual freedom and commercial enterprise. This dilemma would appear to have been with us ever since, but the seventh-century East Angles were the first to have to look it in the eye. Scandinavia and France represented divergent political paths. East Anglia chose one, then the other, then both at once: Bede (*HE* II, 15) describes how Redwald, king of the East Angles, received Christian baptism in Kent, but on his return to East Anglia was persuaded by his wife and certain perverse advisers to renounce his new allegiance. In an attempted compromise he appears to have acknowledged both Christian and pagan principles in the same temple. Whatever private philosophical dilemma may have troubled the mind of Redwald, his conversion and its modification represent a public manoeuvre, and a political experiment. But before 650 the experiment was over. The Christian conversion had taken place, and the landscape was altered both on the ground and in the mind.

### Christian-to-Christian conversions

The political arguments of the seventh-ninth century are unlikely to have been constructed only as pro- and anti-Christian, even if this is the easiest dichotomy to observe. Within Christianity too, we must suppose, there were disagreements about how life should be organised and the Almighty worshipped, and these disagreements must have often been determinant for the communities of the Dark Ages. An examination of the material culture of Ireland, Kent and Northumbria over this period would not lead one to suppose that they were operating to a common ideological formula, even if the documents were to protest to the contrary. Although modern commentators insist that all were equally 'Roman' in their Christian allegiance, even the documents make it plain that individuals and groups of individuals could and did exist who had divergent views of what constituted the correct form of Christian organisation. 'Whenever adherents of the Celtic practice came into contact with followers of the Roman practice, there could be argument' writes Richard Sharpe (1995, 36

et seq); 'Even as late as 600 St Columbanus could link the British and Irish together as "the western churches" (Letters 1.5, 1.9, 2.5, 2.9)' (*ibid.* note 122). Fletcher (1997, 92) prefers to minimise the differences: 'There never was a "Celtic Church". Irish churchmen repeatedly and sincerely professed their Roman allegiances; and if there were divergent practices between Rome and Ireland, well so there were between Rome and Constantinople'. (Not a very happy comparison, since these latter led to a schism which has endured 1500 years). Bede devotes a great deal of attention to the differences between the western and eastern churches of Britain, and reported that the Synod of Whitby, held to determine which was to be followed, was resolved not on the correct tonsure or even the date of Easter, but on who could be said to have the authority of Christ. The decision was, moreover, made not by a cleric but by the king, who ruled in favour of St Peter, and thus Rome (*HE* III, 25). There was obviously rather more than 'divergent practice' at stake. Differences in the computation of the date of Easter, while passionately debated, are likely to have screened important standpoints on contemporary politics: how to make and govern nations, who one's friends should be at this particular juncture, and so on, the daily burden of political decisions spurred by ambition and bridled by fear. This need not imply 'national churches' or a 'Celtic versus Roman model' which are rather narrow interpretations (cf Blair 1996, 6). The differences surely concerned alternative but deeply held convictions about the way life should be lived, alliances struck and people governed.

It seems to me inevitable that there would actually have been at least three different kinds of Christianity on offer in the seventh-to-ninth century, and that conversion could take place to any one of them and indeed out of one and into another. Giving these names is perilous, since all the words are so laden with personal and contextual values which we seldom succeed in deconstructing. But let us just dive in and consider forms of ecclesiastical organisation which are familiar from more recent times: episcopal, monastic and secular (or private). It seems that analogues to all of these existed in fairly well documented forms in the first millennium, the episcopal in France for example, the monastic in Egypt for example and the private, as *eigenkirche*, in later Germany for example. Hints are also given in the documentary record about the preferences of northern peoples: that the monastic system was favoured in the Celtic west and the episcopal in the English south, with Northumbria attempting to reconcile the two. It would be useful if archaeology could throw specific light on these supposed ideological or political preferences,

independently of the existing rhetoric of the documentary terminology, which so tightly structures our expectations. As I hope to show, archaeology can at least give more weight to the third type of ecclesiastical preference, one that naturally receives minimal documentary investment: the private or 'secular' option. It could be said that secular Christianity did not really take hold in Christian England until after the Reformation; but I believe it was a form of non-centrist religious organisation that was always possible for the converted, and, I will suggest, could well have been the norm in Pictland. This method of Christianised social control was less visible, perhaps, than the more clerical institutions with their eulogies, bureaucracies and books, but it would have been prosecuted with equal conviction, and in the present context, could have represented a smoother, politically less drastic transition from a pagan system.

Foster (1996, 90) gives us some good reasons why a king might prefer an episcopal system, especially if social control was already founded on connections to land rather than kin. Whatever the exegetical justification for Bishops and Abbots, the key difference for the tax payer lies in the way that each was funded. The episcopal system took tithes, the monastic involved a grant of land (an option which becomes less attractive as land becomes more productive and communications improve), while the secular depended on the income and attitude of a local lord. In the Mediterranean, the episcopal and monastic strategies would appear to have confronted each other from the fifth century (Carver 1993, ch 2 and refs). The insular documents strive to convince us that both systems, if not all three, operated at once. Fletcher (1997, 92) sees episcopal and monastic structures in parallel existence in Ireland. In France, which had Bishops, Columbanus converted the warrior class using the rural monastery and staffing it with well-connected locals (*ibid.* 136). The monastery may have served as the instrument of local power until it was reformed under Charlemagne in the service of the state. However, there would still be a reasonable contrast to be drawn between formally ecclesiastical and informally secular institutions, which stood for different forms of revenue and control, even if they gave themselves the same name. The overly secular monasteries censured by Bede in his letter to Egbert of York could also have been moving towards this serious political alternative. To follow Fletcher (1997, 192): 'Germanic and Celtic aristocracies quickly discovered that Christianity could be adapted to themselves'. The archaeologist's task is to recognise and define these adaptations, and decode their political meaning on the ground, whatever labels they were later to acquire in ink on vellum.

### *Recognising monasteries*

It is not easy to define the archaeological correlates in Britain which would allow us to recognise the various ideological positions that have been surmised. A tiny settlement of two houses might be dubbed a monastery (Smith 1996, 24), meaning presumably that its inmates were pursuing the monastic agenda, and a rudimentary headquarters might be named as a bishop's seat, signalling likewise the intentioned alignment, without any guarantee that it had been or would be achieved. The early monastery in the north and west of Britain is thought to be identifiable using as a model the oval or semi-circular enclosure, the 'monastic vallum', such as those defined in Ireland, at Iona or Hoddom, an attribution with a long and respectable pedigree (eg Thomas 1971, Chapter 2; Mytum 1992, 80; Fisher 1996; Blair 1996; Lowe 1991). However, there is still no large scale well-dated excavation evidence of a vallum-and-settlement to draw on. Furthermore, the prehistoric (or at least pre-Christian) radiocarbon dates from Portmahomack (below) and now from Iona itself (Fisher 1996, 38) encourage us to question the concept of the 'monastic vallum' altogether. Perhaps all such enclosures were originally prehistoric strongholds, later adapted for Christian monastic missions, just as Roman forts were in the south and east (for example Burgh Castle in East Anglia, Johnson 1983) and among the north British (Smith 1996, 24).

### *Recognising episcopal centres*

Looking to continental Europe for a basis, a Bishop's seat and diocesan centre would reveal itself as a construction of monumental authority in an urban setting. There would be no mistaking a major late Roman and early medieval episcopal centre such as has been revealed at Geneva: a complex of substantial foundations belonging to churches and baptisteries covering more than 6000 sq metres (Bonnet 1993). Similar 'episcopal groups' covering a hectare or more have been defined at Aosta, Salona and elsewhere (Actes 1989). But in northern Europe, even at places like Winchester or York, and still more in the non-Roman north, we have nothing so grand and can expect episcopal aspirations to be expressed more in rhetoric than in masonry. Archaeology can, however, still probably detect the centrist episcopal idea as an ecclesiastical investment in the Roman monumental style, such as the early Canterbury churches.



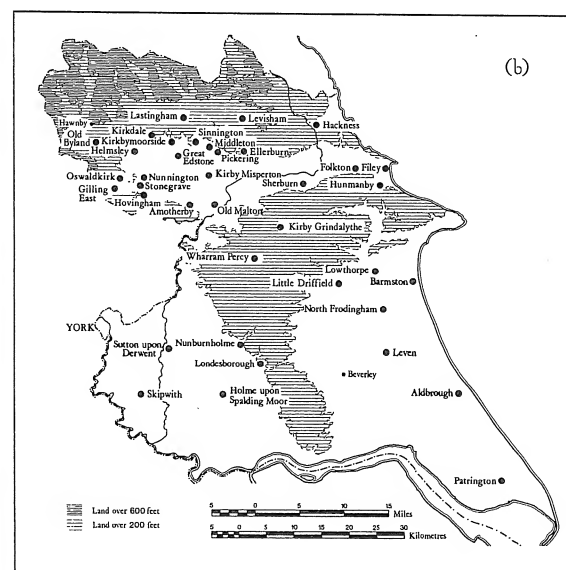
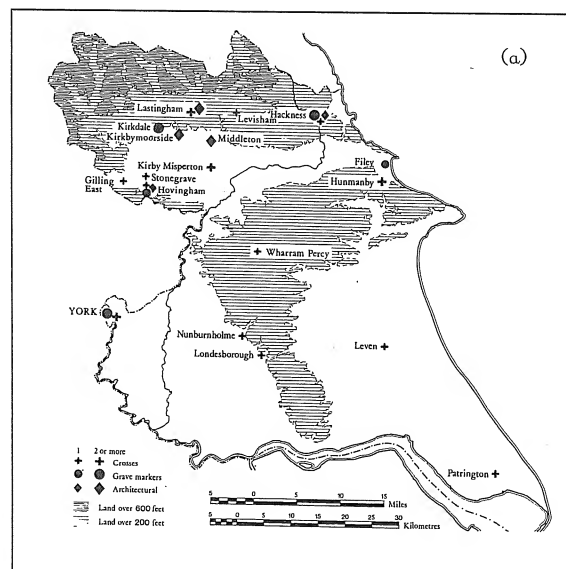
Where such a thing has not been found, we are entitled to doubt the existence of an effective Bishopric, however much the word is bandied about in contemporary writing.

### Recognising secular churches

In contrast to the episcopal and monastic schemes are the religious investments which were made not at ecclesiastical central places at all, but rather in the form of singular monuments, for example sculpture or small churches, located in dispersed estates. Here we can claim to see the signs of a society where ecclesiastical power is harnessed to local *secular* power, in this case distributed in a network of small lordships. The idea that a local potentate might wish to appoint his own minister, bear the costs of constructing a church or putting up a carved stone and at the same time enhance the prestige of his own family in monuments and memorials is not, I would argue, an invention of the Reformation, but was already present as an option in the conversion period; it can also be seen as descending more directly (than other forms of Christianity) from the high status pagan family with its private cemetery of burial-mounds (Müller-Wille 1993, 58-60; Carver and Hummler forthcoming Ch 7). At a certain level, therefore, it ought to be possible to distinguish the episcopal, the monastic and the secular forms of Christianity on the ground, notwithstanding the tendency of the documents to pretend, improbably, that all operated together as one harmonious project. Each system represents a different way of thinking, a different way of organising society and taking (or not taking) tax, and each results in a different material culture, which we are trying to learn to recognise. Here would seem to be a fundamental basis for conversion-period conflict and an important story to dig out.

### Christian to Christian Conversion in Yorkshire

A 'conversion' from one Christian persuasion to another was noted some time ago by Rosemary Cramp and has been illustrated by the work of the late Jim Lang in Yorkshire. Writing about the changes in sculptural form and distribution in the Scandinavian areas, Cramp notes that the Vikings introduced the secular image of the armed warrior into England, and at the same time wrought a fundamental change in the way that land was held: 'The Vikings introduced a secularization of taste in art, just as they secularized land holdings' (Cramp 1980, 18). In Lang's survey of sculpture in York and East Yorkshire



Illus. 1.3  
Sites with (a) pre- and (b) post-Viking sculpture in the East Riding  
(Lang 1991, figs 2 and 3)

(Lang 1991), we find two distinct phases: 7 sites with 15 stones datable to the seventh-eighth century, 10 of which are shared between the monasteries of Lasingham and Hackness (the latter a daughter house of Whitby). And by contrast, 120 stones of the ninth-eleventh centuries are shared between 30 sites, of which only two (Hovingham and Lasingham) were active in the previous phase (illus.1.3). Although we are dealing in both cases with Christian monuments, the change in their type and distribution is striking. The sponsorship of sculpture in the seventh-eighth century is apparently concentrated in monasteries and their dependencies, but the Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture of the ninth-eleventh centuries is quite differently deployed: a carved monument at every village, displaying nice unorthodox repertoire at that. There was no comparable flourishing of mound-burial here (Richards 1991, 111) which would denote a resurgence of the pagan option. The change in investment strategy is not obviously anti-Christian. But it must imply a change in political thinking, and no doubt one that the Vikings fought for: the replacement of a centralised kingdom served by an orthodox authority with a web of small lordships signalling adherence (but not subservience) to a generalised religious viewpoint in which local variation was accepted. In this sense, it was not the English who converted the Vikings, but the Vikings who converted the English, - by persuading them to modify their ideological system to a more acceptable brand of secular, privatised Christianity. We are in the presence of a ninth-century 'dissolution of the monasteries'.

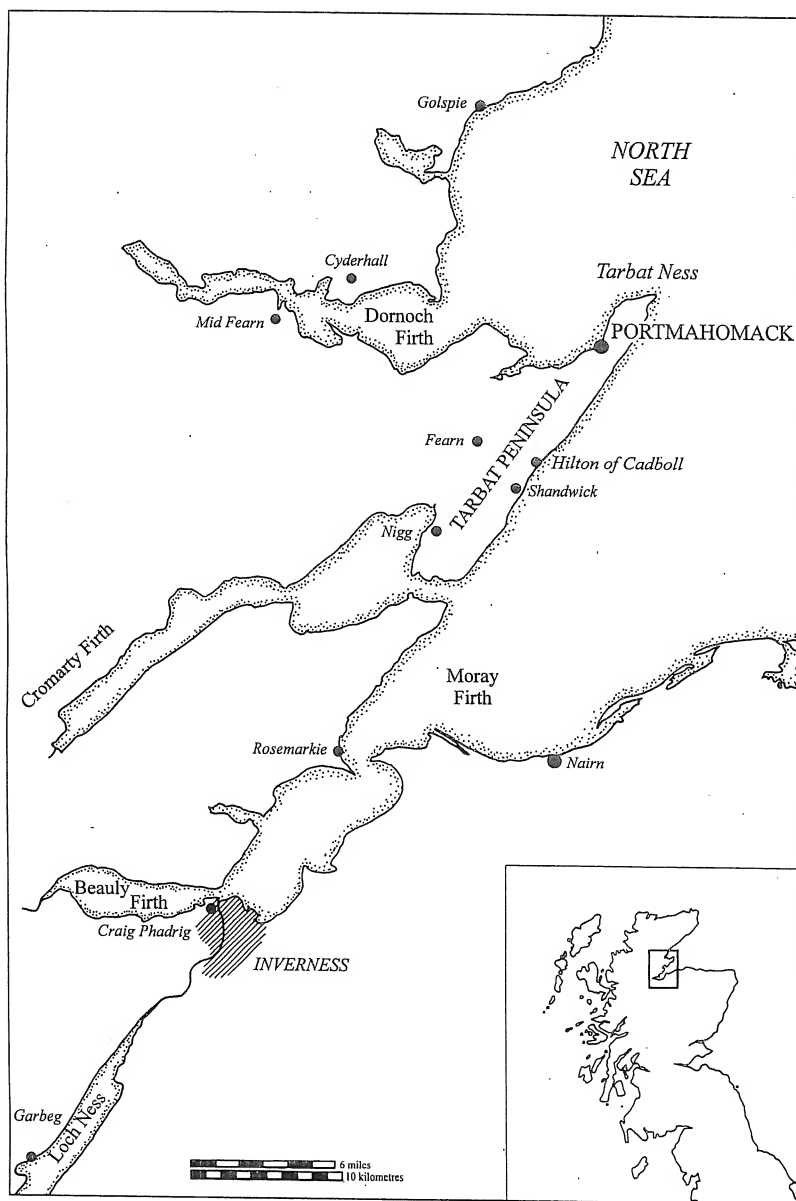
### Conversion in Northern Pictland: the evidence from Tarbat

As a final case study, I would like to travel further north along the east coast and present some of the preliminary deductions which are being made from the so-called *Tarbat Discovery Programme*, an investigation of ancient settlement on Tarbat Ness (Bull. 1995, 1996, 1997). The archaeological language of the Northern Picts is only a little easier to read than their famously sparse and opaque written language. But recent scholarship has taught us to regard the people of the northern firthlands as indigenous, P-Celtic speaking Britons engaged in the same sort of social experiments as their compatriots in Wales and Northumbria (Alcock 1988; Driscoll 1988; Driscoll and Nieke 1988; Driscoll 1991; Forsyth 1995; Foster 1996). An aristocracy is a likely feature of this society from the sixth century, and perhaps there were individuals of whom 'kingship' could be claimed. But the degree of territorial control or centralised power is nevertheless uncertain.

The archaeological repertoire is exiguous and difficult. Burial mounds, round and square, exist, but since we hardly know what is in them, they are not ready to use as indicators of rank or ideology (Ashmore 1980). Whether or not they prove to be routinely associated with burials, the symbol stones of Class I provide the prime indicators of the Pictish cultural zone and the distribution of investment within it: a dispersed pattern in which nearly every piece of productive land carries its own marker (Alcock E 1989). There is a little more indication of centralisation in the stones that carry Christian insignia, ie Class II, in that certain imported ornaments, for example the plant-scroll, concentrate in certain zones, ie the Moray Firth and the upper Tay, which may reflect a focus of power in each of these areas (Gillespie 1994). By the ninth or tenth century, collections of stones may be seen as indicative of estate centres, rather than special ecclesiastical places (Ritchie 1995; pace Smith 1996, 35).

The Moray Firth area (illus. 1.4) is one that has been credited as the origin centre of the Class I stones (Henderson 1958) and was a producer of Class II stones of the highest quality. From documents, and from one document in particular (Adomnan's *Life of Columba*: Sharpe 1995) we are led to expect that it was the heartland of the northern Picts, who had a king by the sixth century, at which time they first confronted a mission of monastic Christianity from Iona. Later we might expect the area to come under the influence of Northumbria, as southern Pictland realigned to the Roman version of Northumbrian Christianity after AD 710 (Foster 1996, 90). In the context of the Tarbat project, I have tried to put aside these assumptions, and entertain other possibilities: that there were no kings, in the English or French sense, among the Picts, nor any Pictish church and that the Picts never necessarily converted to Christianity at all, at least not until the ninth century, when they had technically ceased to be Picts.

For southern Pictland, Smith (1996) reviewed the exiguous evidence for early Christianity with great skill and teased out, to use his apt phrase, a credible picture. He mentioned the failure of archaeology to identify even one church of the early period from southern Pictland, suggested that a diocesan system does not seem to have existed in the seventh century north of the Forth, and plumped for *monasticism* as the likely instrument of the Christianisation of southern Pictland, proposing a foundation for its missionary St Severanus at Culross (1996, 27-28). If we do not actually have any monasteries as yet, there is a striking distribution map of other



Illus. 14

Easter Ross, with sites referred to in the text (Roe; Bull. 1997)

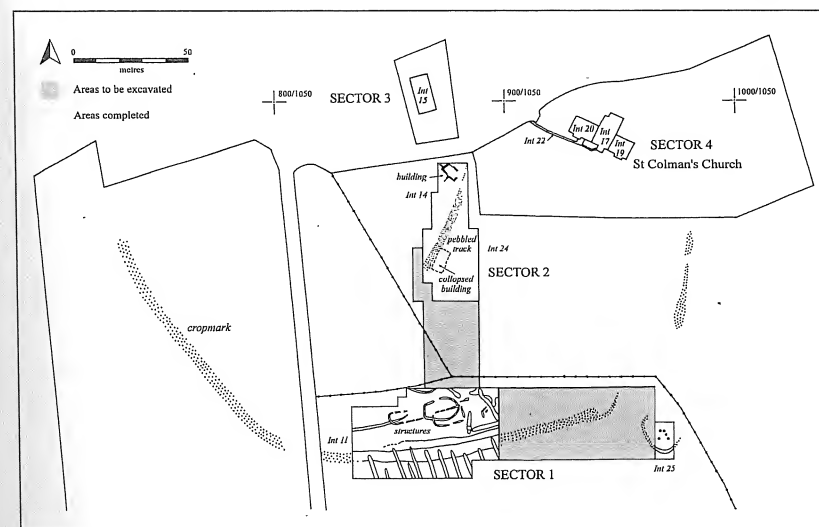
relevant evidence for Fife (*ibid.*, fig 2.5). It shows a mutual respect between the makers of square barrows and Class I symbol stones to the north and, to the south, the long-cist cemeteries, and, one could add, the British-type sculpture, such as the stones at Kilrenny (Trench-Jellicoe, pers. comm.). Smith calls this interface an indication of 'transition', but it may as well be called confrontational, so neatly does it illustrate the border-zone between two communities with different political alignments. After 710, Smith expects the Angles to bring the *episcopal* concept north, although the physical evidence is still slight (1996, 32). He also draws attention to the possible imposition of a 'shire system', which featured an estate centre, a mother church and outlying dependencies, seeing this system as a gift from Northumbria where it had deep roots in the pre-Viking period, as implied by the later organisation of the Patrimony of St Cuthbert. In accepting Smith's invitation to research this important matter further, we should not perhaps be too ready to assume that the estate-based church was merely an adjunct of an episcopal system; it might have been an alternative *secular* structure which needed no Bishops and no monasteries, one moreover which the Picts did not have to be taught how to adopt. Such a system would be the one most appropriate to the character and distribution of the only real evidence for Christian belief that we have from Pictland, the Class II stones.

Northern Pictland, even more deprived of solid evidence than the south, has yet to produce a convincing early Christian establishment. Kathleen Hughes (1970) remarked on the absence of illuminated manuscripts, which would be easy enough to explain if the Christianity adopted was primarily secular. Although Isabel Henderson (1989, 6) believes that we should not conclude (with Hughes) that there were no scriptoria in Pictland, we are still open to believe that there were no monasteries. C D Morris (1989, 15; 1996, 64) is sceptical of the identification of sites such as the Brough of Birsay as monasteries of the Pictish period and prefers a secular interpretation. Foster (1996, 100) sees the eighth-century Céili Dé as a reactive movement against secular Christian establishments, which implies at least a previous secularity of some strength, especially in the east. My interim conclusions just require us to allow that Christianity can be accepted and professed in different political forms, and our target should be to pin these down if possible. Accepting this would be sufficient to diminish our expectations of finding monasteries or even an organised 'Pictish Church', but to alert us to the possibility of

revealing a much more interesting and original system for the east of Scotland in the early historic period.

The Tarbat site is situated around St Colman's Church, otherwise Tarbat Old Church, at Portmahomack on Tarbat Ness (illus. 1.4). It first attracted notice as a place which had produced over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of fragments of carved stone, all of Class II and III, including the famous Latin inscription on TR13. A small Viking-period hoard of coins and ring-silver suggested a Norse presence as did the identification of Tarbat Ness with *Torfness* where a battle was fought in about AD 1030 (Crawford 1987, 73). In 1984, Ian Keiller and Barri Jones spotted a cropmark which took the form of a penannular ditch resembling the Iona *vallum*, but Jill Harden's 1991 investigation of this ditch radiocarbon-dated it to between the second and the sixth century AD. Even if it had become less likely to be a monastic *vallum*, the omens were good that there was a settlement in use here from the pagan Pictish through to the Norse period (Bull 1995, 7-42; Harden 1996).

Following a lengthy evaluation, excavations began in 1996 (illus. 1.5, 1.6). Open air ovens, a souterrain and a bag-shaped building have been defined near the ditch, which appears incidentally to have mainly served as a water-collector. None of these internal features has been dated, but I expect them to belong with the enclosure ditch to the earliest phase of settlement in the second to sixth century. Inside the church, the sequence began with a group of long-cist burials, which were succeeded by burials using stone head-supports and then by burials in wooden coffins. The first stone church takes the form of a simple rectangle and is later than the cist burials (Illus. 1.7; Bull. 1997). Into its foundations had been built at least 5 stone monuments. Three of these are simple crosses on grave markers. TR 22 is a massive slab which carries a boar and a lion in relief along one side and a cross on its short end and was probably a sarcophagus lid. The fifth, which had been built into the foundations of the early church at one stage, but was actually found incorporated into a sixteenth century vault, TR 20, is a stone which features, on one side, a row of clerics, together with a 'bear' and two 'lions' devouring half a stag, and on the other a fine rampant dragon-like beast; assuming a symmetrical pattern, Liz Hooper has worked out that this fragment came from a massive stone originally 3 metres high (illus. 1.8). Joanna Close-Brooks has pointed out (pers. comm.), that the spiriform terminal within a diamond-shaped frame on the 'Dragon' side



Illus. 1.5

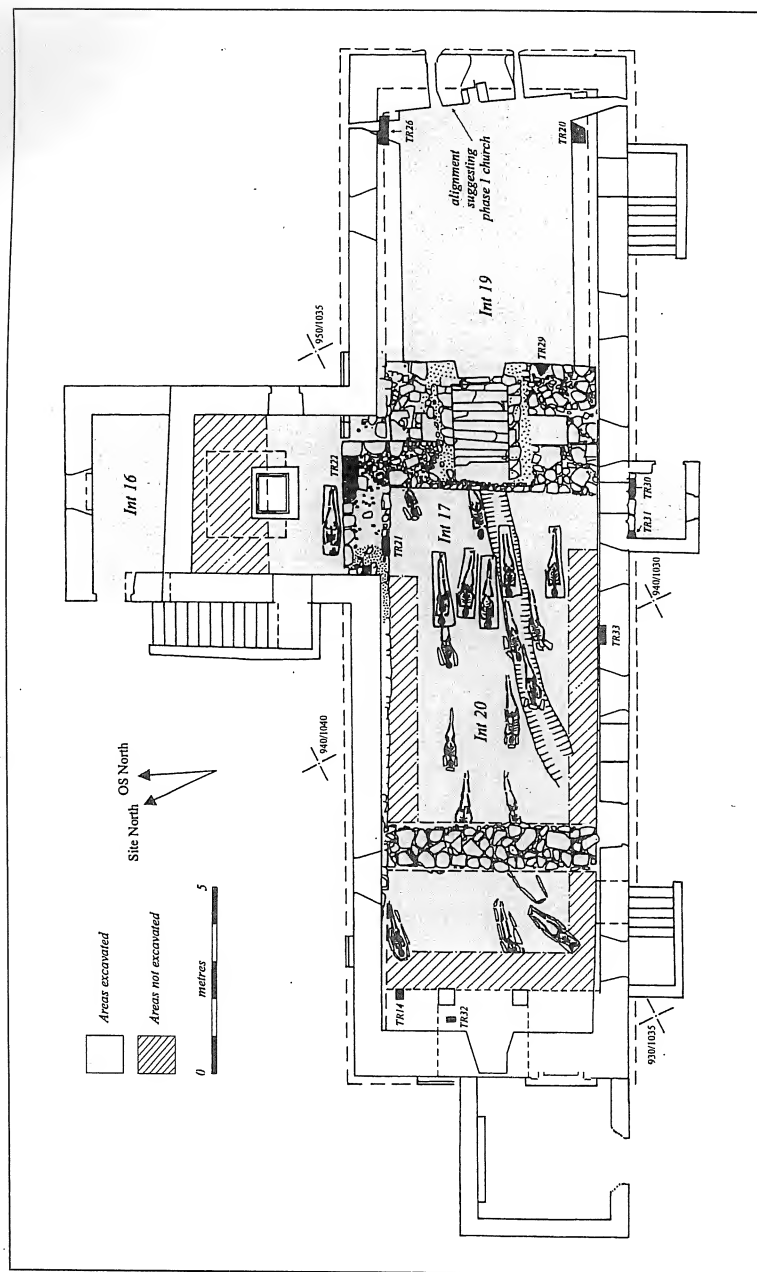
Plan of the Tarbat site with excavated features (Roe; Bull. 1997)



Illus. 1.6

The Tarbat site under excavation in 1995 (TRS12/36/x2804)



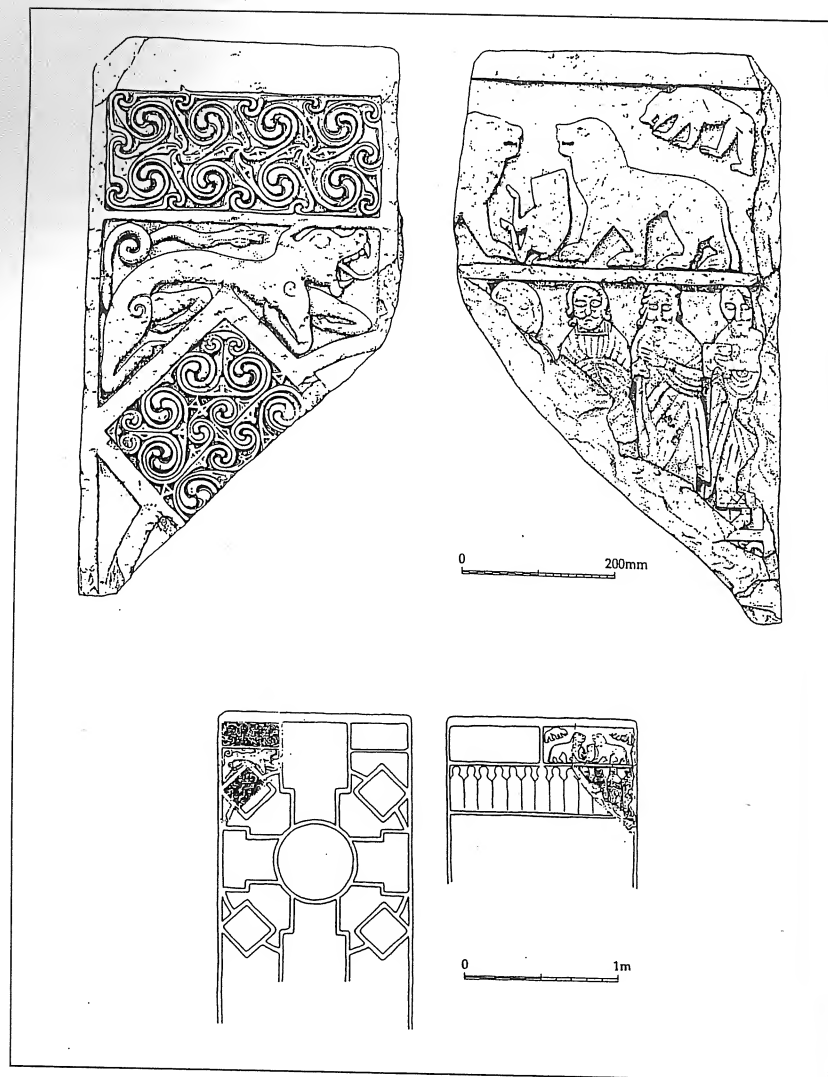


Illus. 1.7  
Preliminary plan of St Colman's or Tarbat Old Church, Portmahomack (Roe; Bull 1997)

of TR20 matches that on the side of the famous Latin inscription (TR13; Allen and Anderson 1903, I, fig 96) found in the Manse wall, raising the possibility that both were originally part of the same imposing monument.

The dates of the carved stones of Tarbat probably centre on the early ninth century, as do the monuments of the neighbours, those at Hilton of Cadboll, Nigg and Shandwick, and at Rosemarkie (Henderson 1989). There is a persistent expectation that the area will produce a monastery, either of the Columban genre in the seventh century or of Northumbrian derivation in the eighth (Henderson 1989, 5,6; Higgitt 1982; and Harden in *Bull.* 1995, and more cautiously, Harden 1996) but it might be wise to pause before assuming that either Irish or English ecclesiastical patterns have to be replicated in Pictland. Some imagery is Christian beyond doubt, and some of this, such as the depictions of desert fathers and King David (at Nigg) are iconographically advanced. But the range of everyday outdoor activities featured on all the pieces is impressive: fighting, hunting, dancing, playing trumpets; if not certainly secular, it is hardly emphatically monastic. Looking at the back of TR 20, one sees a fierce beast with a distinct Viking snarl to it, and this side at least could be a candidate for a Hiberno-Scandinavian label. One might say that the character and distribution of the sculpture of Easter Ross - heterodox and dispersed - does recall that of Scandinavian Yorkshire. It would not be surprising, if, with or without Viking encouragement, the northern Picts were to have put their own preferred political construction on Christianity, and adapted it to a secular structure in the ninth century.

It is less certain, however, in this case what these northern Picts were then being converted *from*: Christianity of a different kind or paganism. A previous Northumbrian monastic phase was expected, from the Latin inscription on TR13: 'The inscription is in Latin and shows knowledge of epigraphic formulae used elsewhere in the British Isles. It is written in lettering of a type developed in Northumbrian manuscripts. These features argue that at Tarbat, or somewhere very close by, there was an ecclesiastical centre with contacts that went beyond Pictland' (Higgitt 1982). But this Northumbrian attribution looks a lot less convincing if the inscribed stone is part of TR20 with its facing clerics and fanged beast. Some reconciliation is required if the Tarbat inscription, dated from its similarities to the Insular script in the Lindisfarne Gospels to the early eighth century (Henderson 1989, 6), actually forms part of the 'Monk' stone which is datable on stylistic grounds, like the other great monuments of Easter Ross (Henderson 1989, 3) to the early ninth century. Here

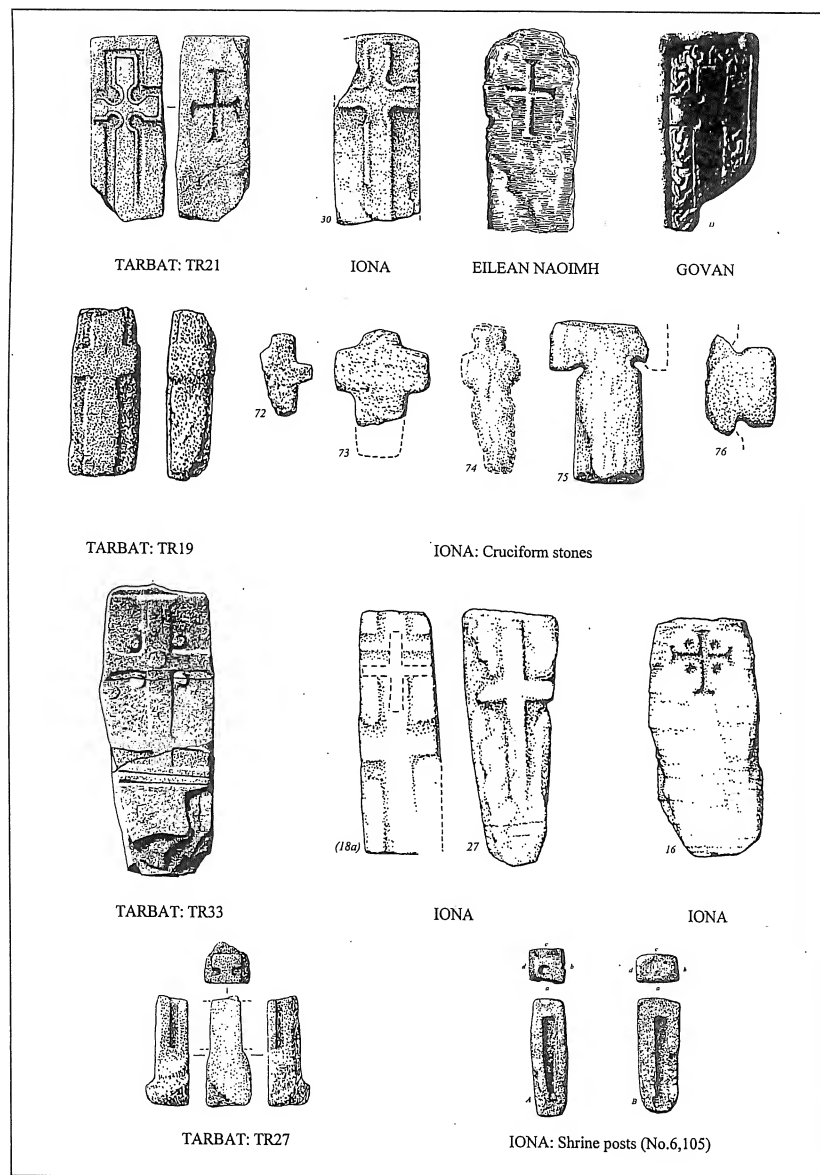


Illus. 1.8

Both faces of the "Monkstone" TR 20, drawn and reconstructed by Liz Hooper (*Bull.* 1996)

the Book of Kells, cited by Higgitt (1982), might be summoned to the rescue once again; the majuscules employed on Kells' display-pages, even if built on tradition are not too distant in type from those on TR13 (see for example the form of 'N' and 'U' on Kells f 124r). The use of relief to present the lettering on the Tarbat piece could also support a later date for this inscription (Henderson 1989, 22). In brief, it should be possible to assemble a good case for the complete 'Monk' stone (TR20), incorporating the inscription TR 13, being a monument of the early ninth century, its most direct affiliations being with the Book of Kells. The motifs on TR1, such as the plant scroll are 'Northumbrian' in origin, but by the later eighth century have entered the general repertoire of Insular Art. It was available to all carvers and illuminators and by then need carry no message of affiliation or alignment (Henderson, pers. comm.). The snake boss motif indicates a strong link between Iona and Easter Ross in the ninth century (Henderson 1987); but such a link can presumably also be the result of drawing on a common repertoire of the period rather than implying a ninth-century domination of Easter Ross by Iona. Certainly, the similarities between many of the Tarbat stones and those from Iona indicate a bit more than a passing artistic reference, even if it is hard to say at present to which periods between the sixth century and the ninth they should all be assigned (illus. 1.9). There may have been a Columban-period establishment. Or the ninth-century Scottish interest in the north-east may have resulted in a new monastic phase inspired by Iona; or alternatively, the more secular organisation suggested here may have prevailed, one which eclectically absorbed and re-issued motifs associated with Iona.

My present position is that we could not currently claim to have any certain contact with Christianity at the Tarbat site before the ninth century, but have by no means ceased to expect it. Whatever may have happened before 800 (and this we hope to discover), by the early ninth century high quality monumental stones stood within a graveyard, not only at Portmahomack, but at Nigg, in a cemetery on the hill at Shandwick, and at or near the site of Hilton of Cadboll, likewise in all probability located originally on the hill above present Hilton. The traditional site of the Hilton of Cadboll stone, which represents where it stood after 1676, was St Mary's Chapel by the seashore, a site recently suggested to be the deserted medieval settlement of *Catboll-fisher* (Carver 1998). Where the stone stood in the ninth century has yet to be determined. If the ninth-century monuments on Tarbat Ness signalled the centres or boundaries of estates, the estates were small since they have to share a narrow peninsula;



Illus. 1.9

Grave-markers and other carved stones from Tarbat with comparative pieces from Iona  
(Rog; Bull 1997)

but each was rich enough to produce great art. There is no cause at present to expect them individually to have fronted monasteries or other early ecclesiastical establishments.

## Conclusion ~~~~~

Such a model, with its putative mosaic of estates recalls similar interpretations suggested for eastern Scandinavia. Sawyer (1983, 119) memorably evoked the Vendel period in the Mälaren as 'a stage in which relatively small units of lordship were the norm'. Recent studies of the celebrated site at Helgö (Lundström 1988) have re-examined its claim to high status centrality and expressed scepticism for the existence of a central place run by a central authority in the seventh century. A closer parallel to Pictish Scotland has been found in Gotland, which itself may be seen as a mosaic of estates or territories into which the island was divided, their boundaries marked by picture-stones. In parallel with Pictland, the earliest Gotlandic stones were in cemeteries, but about 700 they began to be set beside roads and in places where they could be seen by many people (Nylen 1988, 142; Andrén 1993, 38). Andrén (1993, 36) explores a metaphorical interpretation for the siting of the picture-stones on boundaries; but this does not exclude a social role as a marker of an estate or inheritance (cf Driscoll 1988). In brief, it is not impossible to imagine such a system, with no recognised king and no established church, enduring in north-east Scotland at least until the ninth century. If it was not a system created by the Norse, it would be nonetheless greatly to their liking.

Between the seventh century and the tenth, therefore, the east coast of Britain is likely to have seen a variety of ideological manifestos proclaimed by its monuments. These may represent political options within the systems that we know loosely as paganism or Christianity. And since people will always argue about the correct way to live, conflict or the fear of conflict will have caused ideological alignments to change and find expression in monuments and material practices, here as all over post-Roman Europe (Carver 1993). In this way, the time may come when we can study not only the structure and habitat of early medieval communities, but the motives and alliances which really drove them forward.

## Acknowledgment ~~~~~

I would like to pay tribute to the cited piece of work by the late Ian Smith (1996), which I read only after giving my paper at the conference, and to thank Annette Roe and Justin Garner-Lahire, my co-directors at Tarbat, and Graham Robins for sharing their work with me.

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## Pictland, Northumbria and the Carolingian Empire.

### Raymond Lamb

In the eighth century we see the archetypically mediaeval, symbiotic power-relationship between kingship and the Roman Church coming together in a remarkably precocious way. Offa, with an archbishopric of his very own at Lichfield, and Charlemagne, with his eventual coronation on the day of Our Lord's Nativity precisely eight centuries after His Incarnation, both legitimised and strengthened their power in alliance with the institutionalised faith. While Offa's kingdom was dominant in southern Britain, the northern counterpart to Mercia's power, displaying a similar precocity in its institutions, was the Pictish kingdom.

Mercia in the eighth century had grown politically strongest of the English kingdoms, but Northumbria - her military pre-eminence broken, as Bede (*HE*, iv, 26) recognized, at the hands of the Picts in 685 - retained widespread respect for the learning and artistry which flourished within her monasteries. The contemporaneous utilisation of this Northumbrian expertise by Frankish and by Pictish rulers, both with very much the same ends in sight, suggests North Sea comings and goings fed not only from the Seine, Thames and Rhine, but extended beyond the Humber and the Tyne to the Tay and even to the Northern Isles. The years 714-15 are symbolically central to this episode.

It was in 714 that Pippin of Herstal died, and his illegitimate son Charles Martel succeeded him as effective ruler of the Franks. The father had established a strong Frankish interest in the Low Countries which under the son was to extend into Germany. Willibrord - St Clement - by now had established his see at Utrecht. Northumbrian interest in the Christianisation of the Frisian Islands and Holland had been marked long before by a brief visit from Wilfrid, but Bede identifies Egbert as instigator of the serious mission which bore fruit. It was Egbert's intention to make this mission his own life's work, and Bede (*HE*, v, 9) makes much of the Divine instruction, delivered in two successive dreams through the mouth of Boisil, a revered former prior of Melrose, to one of his ex-pupils, which commanded Egbert to turn his personal attention away from the Continent and towards the monasteries of the Columban tradition. These were ploughing a crooked furrow by their adherence to aberrant practices, most obviously in respect of the liturgical calendar, and it was to be Egbert's

life's work to bring them - and ultimately Iona itself - under allegiance to the Roman Church. This is the key passage in which Bede shows us the link - the person of Egbert - between the Continental mission and what became the Roman reformation of the Pictish Church. Egbert obeyed the instruction by cancelling his own plans to go to the Continent, but pupils, coached by him for the work, went in his stead.

Charles Martel celebrated his accession by making a generous endowment of land to the support of Willibrord's see. Utrecht then became the base from which the Christian faith, already in an institutional form, and with it Frankish political influence, would be taken into Germany under the leadership of Winfrith - St Boniface.

715 is the revised date - argued by Kirby (1973) - for the famous correspondence between King Nechtan of the Picts and Abbot Ceolfrid of Jarrow, which confirmed the king's switching of his ecclesiastical adherence from the Columban to the Roman. It also represents, of course, a political rapprochement between the former enemies, the kings of Pictland and of Northumbria, which on the Pictish side possibly marks recognition of Dalriada as the future threat: Nechtan's own dynastic position, as soon was to be proved, was none too secure. But the political power of the Pictish kingdom itself was growing.

By 717, Nechtan had ordered the expulsion from his domains of all Columban clergy who refused to conform to the new order. Bede, writing in 731, was joyful that the Pictish nation at last had placed itself under the protection of St Peter; and seeing that Egbert thirteen years before his death in 729 had managed to bring over Iona itself, he had the satisfaction of seeing God's will coming to fruition as he knew that it was bound to do. Bede therefore made the Pictish reformation the decisive culmination of his *Ecclesiastical History* (v, 21), leaving us unbriefed on the diplomacy which led up to it, and startlingly uninformed about the practicalities of the fundamental reorganisation which it would have been intended to initiate. So seriously undocumented is this important follow-up period, that Kirby was led to write, entirely reasonably, that there was 'no evidence to show that any attempt was made to introduce the Roman hierarchy of ecclesiastical orders, even though this was a fundamental and crucial issue' (Kirby 1973, 20).

## Orkney and the Pictish Church

In that last statement Kirby was precisely right; the introduction of a fundamentally new structure of power, which would greatly consolidate his own rule, surely was to Nechtan a major objective - if not *the* main point - of the exercise. The part that Egbert undoubtedly played in guiding Nechtan towards the re-alignment, is brilliantly demonstrated in Kirby's paper. The indication that a most effective ecclesiastical power-structure really was put in place arose fortuitously from routine archaeological survey in Orkney, which is outlined elsewhere (Lamb 1992; 1993). The striking thing about the pattern of churches dedicated to St. Peter (Peterkirks) is not just the association of these churches with brochs, but that these were especially big - and therefore likely to have been important - ones. The broch-mound of the Stronsay Peterkirk is so big that it went unremarked upon, as a natural hill. The Peterkirks which most readily display the characteristics of the genre are those in the outer North Isles along with the one in Evie; all of these in terms of modern communications are remote, and received scant attention from earlier reporters. Reading the descriptions of those sites made during the inventorisation of Orkney (published in 1946), one could not have deduced that they had common characteristics beyond the Petrine dedication: their association with major brochs, and the local, traditional, special significance attached to these churches even though they were not parish churches. They form a pattern of minster churches quite distinct and apart from the parochial system - which probably dates from the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries, after the establishment of the bishopric in Kirkwall. It is important to appreciate that the retarded recognition of the Peterkirk pattern is ascribable to a modern and uniquely Orcadian circumstance - the infrequent and esoteric timetabling and extreme leisureliness (until 1991) of the Edwardian-style North Isles steamers, which effectively discouraged visiting archaeologists from penetrating beyond the Mainland and Rousay. It is unlikely that other Peterkirk systems wait to be discovered in other parts of the Highlands. This classic pattern appears so clear-cut in Orkney, for the reason that Orkney was at the point of adopting the organisation of the Roman Church, in a form which has the stamp of Wilfrid upon it, precisely at the point in history when this matter was at the top of a political agenda and the best minds in western Christendom were directed on to it.

In the light of Kirby's deductions, reinforced by the more recent art-historical study by George Henderson (1987, 92-7), we can identify those

minds as belonging to a team led by Egbert. Henderson recognizes Egbert's role in cross-fertilising the graphic arts throughout the areas of Britain and the Continent over which his influence extended, and in particular he identifies Egbert's interests in Pictland as the source of the naturalistic, Pictish-inspired animals which occur in such Gospel-books as Echternach. A cameo of this wide-ranging interest, which incidentally throws light on political relations between Orkney and the Pictish kingdom in the lead-in to the events of 715, is afforded by the well-known eagle of the Knowe of Burrian stone, which looks so like a model for the Eagle of St John in the Gospel-book fragment now in Cambridge (Corpus Christi College MS 197b). The Burrian eagle is one of three from the north-western corner of the Orkney Mainland (the others being the stylistically later and artistically inferior one on the symbol-stone from the Brough of Birsay, and a lost one from the Broch of Oxtro), making it likely that the eagle had a special local significance, probably associated with a potentate who had a residence on the Brough of Birsay. The status of the Brough of Birsay as a seat of eighth-century secular power, is indicated by the crucibles and moulds which reveal the presence of a silversmith working under patronage there (Curle 1982). Whoever that locally powerful notable was in the opening decade of the eighth century, and whether he were the ruler of all of Orkney or only of part of it, he will have been aware of the growing external power of the Pictish kingdom. His position will have been that of the petty rulers of parts of Germany which were being eyed-up for inclusion under Frankish suzerainty, and who would become targets for the Bonifacian mission. This Orkney notable decided upon diplomatic co-operation with the Pictish power; and that he chose wisely, and had his own local prestige subsequently confirmed under allegiance to the Pictish king, is indicated by the wealth which his successors were able to concentrate on the Brough of Birsay. Either he or his representative travelled to the Pictish court when the matter of ecclesiastical reformation was being discussed there. The eventual agreement involved the formal conversion of Orkney to Christianity and the installation there of an ecclesiastical organisation, the planning and execution of which were entrusted to Egbert. Between the Orkney party and Egbert's, diplomatic gifts were exchanged. One of these from the Orkney side was a portable item - probably a piece of silverwork - which bore the eagle iconography in a form closely related to that of the Burrian stone. Thus the Burrian 'imago aquilae' passed into Egbert's wide-ranging circle, to be directed into the hands of the illuminator commissioned to produce the St John page of the Corpus Gospel-book.

Only in Orkney do we see so very clearly an ecclesiastical system showing such obvious premeditation in its imposition, and readily relatable to a reconstructable historical context. It must have been put into place either as an accompaniment to the Pictish reformation of 715-17, or within a very few years of it, when the guiding hand of Egbert was at its strongest and most immediate. The system then put in place shows no trace of having been influenced by any Christian institution already existing; indeed, there has been in Orkney no discovery of any distinctively Christian artefact which need be dated earlier than the eighth century. But the Burrian and Corpus eagles hint at diplomatic activity between at least one local potentate and the Pictish royal court at a time when Egbert's party was present there, and we may be sure that the decision to bring Orkney firmly and immediately under the sway of the Church, was one aspect of a political deal between the local and the central powers. That is to say, that although institutional Christianity had not reached Orkney in the seventh century, the local ruling elite was well acquainted with it, and no doubt weighed up the pros and cons of conversion, but - like Penda of Mercia and Radbod of Friesland under arguably parallel circumstances - made a judgement that so bold a step had drawbacks that outweighed the advantages. By the second decade of the eighth century, the future relationship between Orkney and the burgeoning Pictish kingdom was clearer, and the decision to introduce Christianity in so highly institutionalised a form, took place against a background of Northumbrian-Pictish political rapprochement and an ecclesiastical reformation in which Nechtan was being advised by Egbert. Because it happened at just this moment, the structure in Orkney has Egbert's trademark branded on it, and we can see when and how it was done. Can we draw any related conclusions about the Pictish Church both in Shetland, to the north, and in what we may call Northern Pictland, to the south (that is to say, the east coast between Inverness and Caithness) within which we now can take account of the exciting work at Portmahomack? (see Chapter I above).

### Shetland

There are no Peterkirks in Shetland, but there are 'papa' place-names extending as far afield as Yell, Unst and Fetlar, taking (in those three cases) the significant form 'Papil' and attaching themselves to tracts of the best agricultural land. The Church certainly came into possession of extensive estates throughout Shetland, and there are enough associations of early chapel sites with brochs or other settlement sites occupied in the Iron Age, to suggest the familiar link

between old-established secular power and the new force of Christianity. Probably Shetland was not politically ready for the Church at the time of Egbert's Pictish reformation, and by the time Christianity was established there, Egbert had been dead for some years, eventually having achieved his dream of bringing even Iona round to the Roman allegiance (leaving only the hopeless-case Clydesiders still obstinately adhering to their politically incorrect tonsures and out-of-date liturgical calendars), and people no longer felt it necessary to invoke the authority of St Peter at every turn. At the time of the ecclesiastical ferment of 715-17, the ruling powers in Shetland, no doubt observing what was going on between Orkney and Pictland, even may have thought it in their interest to assert a vigorous paganism - much as Radbod had done. The sinister carving from Mail in Cunningsbrough (Turner 1994) (subject to its dating being so very uncertain), may have a bearing here. Although leading opinion has assigned this, as being related by technique and style to Class I work, to the early seventh century, there is impressive parallel between the figure's garment and one depicted on the cross-slab from Golspie, which (like the Brough of Birsay slab which also offers a parallel) surely must belong a long way into the eighth century. The Mail stone is an assertively pagan statement, which, because of awareness of Christian sculpture and of Christianity as a threatening new ruling order, was probably sketched well within the eighth century.

I have argued elsewhere (Lamb 1995) that the choice of the Orkney island of Papa Westray as the eventual seat of a Pictish bishopric was made at the planning stage of the evangelisation of Orkney, in the light of awareness of that island's excellent position on the safest connecting route with Shetland, and of a declared policy of linking the two island-groups, at least initially, under one ecclesiastical leadership. The links suggested by maritime geography between the impressively extensive St Boniface site on Papa Westray, and the Christian centres on Shetland at St Ninian's Isle and at Papil on Burra are reiterated by the sculptures (including portions of corner-post shrines ultimately of Northumbrian inspiration) found at the three sites. The dedication is ostensibly not to St Boniface of Crediton, evangelist of the Rhineland, but to a hagiographer's pasteboard Pictish St Boniface known only from sources belonging to the late Middle Ages and we shall meet him again in the Black Isle. Surely, however, this Pictish Boniface was invented by a much later generation, no longer holding the straight historical thread, upon whom they invested some garbled recollections of the eighth-century circumstance. Those dedications do

belong properly to the St Boniface of Crediton who to this day is honoured by the Germans. He was a legend in his own lifetime and his martyrdom in 753 or 754 sent a shock-wave through Christian Europe. It would have been natural for a Pictish Church in which pupils of Egbert remained influential, to apply this dedication to the seat of a newly-created bishopric, a development which we reasonably should expect around this time, if we take contemporaneous events in Germany as a model. Possibly by this stage, diplomacy had made progress with the ruling power (or powers) in Shetland, and the primary centres for the evangelisation of that country soon were to be established on the western side of the south Mainland.

The sculptures at those two centres, of course, need not have been - and almost certainly were not - made and erected until some time after the centres were founded. Stevenson (1981) suggested a date around 800 for the upright Papil cross-slab, with all other Shetland Christian sculptures (including the Papil 'pony-rider' shrine panel) going into the ninth century. The creation of the shrine of which this panel formed one side probably represents a stage in the veneration of the corporeal relics of a holy man, who well could have been the leader of the group (whose lesser members are shown carrying book-satchels as if for the endowment of a library) which established the house and with it, institutional Christianity in Shetland. He is riding a pony, conveying the ideas both of a journey, and of high social status. We are not meant to suppose that the actual journey was other than by sea, as the sculptor may be hinting by his suggestion of waves forming the ground. Where any person of standing was involved, however, Pictish society did not separate the idea of 'journey' from that of 'horse'. The representation of pony and rider is the work of a mainstream Pictish sculptor although not an outstandingly good one; we fairly may imagine such a man seeking patronage in an outlying area. He has taken care to get right the equestrian minutiae which Pictish patrons of the arts were fussy about, even down to the fine detail of the pony's bridle with its brow-band, throat-lash and characteristically high-set noseband.

### The Black Isle

If we look southwards from Orkney, the Black Isle is the most favoured area of agricultural richness on the east coast north of Inverness. The centre there of course is Rosemarkie, with the obvious implications arising from a substantial group of ecclesiastical sculptures alongside a Petrine dedication. The name of



Peter is coupled with those of Curadan, or Quirritinus, and Boniface, and the Boniface dedication was applied in the thirteenth century to the new Cathedral at nearby Fortrose to which the bishopric, formerly at Rosemarkie, then was transferred. The sculptures indicate an ecclesiastical establishment which was wealthy by the end of the eighth century and which flourished well into the ninth. The Groam House lecture series contains an excellent study of them by Isabel Henderson (1990), followed by an exhaustive account of the extremely complex and difficult problem of these saints' identities, by Aidan MacDonald (1992). It appears that Curadan was an historical person, with whom has been conflated a less tangible figure, Boniface.

These investigations have revealed just three commemorations of St Boniface in Scotland. These are the church on Papa Westray, a chapel near Forfar, and the traditional name of a spring at Rosemarkie. The dedication of the Fortrose cathedral evidently follows from the Rosemarkie association. The first two of these occur in regions - Orkney and Angus - where concentrations of Petrine dedications are found, and at Rosemarkie there is an immediate association with St Peter. Macdonald's Groam House lecture must be resorted to for scholarly and detailed exposition of this material. He suggests that as St Regulus is traditionally associated with the introduction of the cult of St Andrew into Pictland, so Boniface-Kirritinus 'was especially connected (originally or as the legend developed) with the cultus of St Peter and its introduction or wider dissemination among the Picts' (1992, 19).

As already suggested, the origin of these dedications to an ostensibly Pictish Boniface is best explained within the same general context as the Petrine dedications in Orkney and also in Angus, including that of Restenneth - but some forty years later. The Orkney Peterkirks network is the creation of Egbert, who also was the father-figure of the Continental missions of which the most renowned figure was Winfrith, alias Boniface. He was as good as recognized as a saint in his own lifetime, and on his martyrdom in the 750s was venerated as one. The senior clerics in the Pictish Church owed their positions to the success of Egbert's reforms, or were protégés of original beneficiaries of those reforms. Remembering the huge increase in the benefices of the Church in Northumbria which followed the Synod of Whitby, the stress which Wilfrid had laid upon generous endowments, the extent of Church property within Frankish Gaul, and the generous gifts of lands bestowed at Utrecht and

throughout the progress of the subsequent mission into Germany - we can deduce that the Pictish Church of the mid eighth century will have been enjoying a material prosperity, the appropriateness of which Egbert will have impressed upon Nechtan. The extent and quality of Pictish ecclesiastical estates are indicated by the 'papa' place-names in Orkney and Shetland (Lamb 1995), and by the quality of late eighth-century and ninth-century sculpture produced under ecclesiastical patronage. Churchmen enjoying the fruits of Egbert's work will have been predisposed to venerate St Boniface. In the cases of Papa Westray and Rosemarkie, the dedication may have been applied on the establishment of these churches as full bishoprics.

The situation in the Black Isle probably is a little more complicated than in Orkney, in that Christianity may have been established there a decade or two before the initiatives of Nechtan and Egbert. It may have involved Lismore which is strategically placed at the other end of the Great Glen. But Lismore's adherence already was Roman. If the reformation of 715-17 impinged upon an establishment already existing at Rosemarkie, that establishment would have been at an early stage of growth, and the changes to it are likely to have been administrative rather than liturgical.

Whereas Rosemarkie is notable for the quantity and concentration of sculptures, the cross-slabs at Nigg, Hilton of Cadboll and Shandwick are remarkable for their size and quality. With their juxtaposition of aristocratic hunting scenes with the Christian cross, they speak of an alliance of secular and ecclesiastical power supported by estate-derived revenues which allowed the patronage of craftsmen. The current excavations at Portmahomack give us occasion to wonder what the mutual relationships among all these locations may have been. A striking feature of Portmahomack is how fortuitous was the survival of the few fragments of carved stones which first drew attention to the site. The fragments of cross-slabs are very small pieces of several very large and impressive monuments which, moreover, were of the very highest quality (Harden, 1995). There also is the remarkable inscription in Roman letters, stylistically indicating local familiarity with mainstream manuscript styles, and continuing contact with Northumbria (Higgitt, 1982). A lesson here is how easily we could have lost all obvious pointers to what now is demonstrated to be a highly significant centre. There may be other such centres awaiting discovery.

At least one such centre must have existed somewhere on the coastal strip in the neighbourhood of Golspie and Brora, where many sculptured stones collected in Dunrobin Castle have been usefully catalogued (Close-Brooks, 1981). The greater number of pieces in the Dunrobin collection are Class I Pictish symbol stones of high quality, and the substantial ogham-inscribed cross-slab from Golspie churchyard has on the reverse symbols, animals and an axe-wielding human figure, all done in incised technique. Does this perhaps suggest a vigorous local tradition going back into the seventh century, which has made its mark on the monuments of later eighth-century Christianity? Pieces of two further interlaced-ornamented relief cross-slabs turned up in 1869 during the construction of the Duke of Sutherland's railway, one at Collieburn, about two-and-a-half miles downline from Brora station, the other some two miles further down, about a mile short of the now disused station at Loth. Not far from the find-spot of the Collieburn stone, a third relief cross-slab comes from Clyne church, also notable for Class I stones. Nearby is Kintradwell - also with symbol-stones - where we seem to have a commemoration of St Triduana, or Tredwell. She appears as one of the companions of St Boniface in the Aberdeen Breviary, with whom she is also linked by the dedication of another major broch/ecclesiastical site in Papa Westray, a companion site to St Boniface's. Her best-known cult centre was at Restalrig. Dedications to 'companions of Boniface' are very usefully assembled by MacDonald (1992).

The third Duke of Sutherland enjoyed driving his own engine on his own railway, but it stopped abruptly a little short of Helmsdale. His ambition was to press northward along the coast to Wick, taking in the substantial fishing-villages along the way. The engineers were defeated, being forced by the formidable barrier of the Ord of Caithness to send the line climbing gradually by an inland route across the desolate Flow Country bogs. Even today the A9 coastal road has difficult stretches crossing the Ord. Caithness does not necessarily take up whatever happens south of Helmsdale. The question in our period of study, is which had been the lesser barrier - the Ord of Caithness or the Pentland Firth? Was the Church in Caithness organised from south, or, as Shetland's was, through Orkney? In favour of the direct southward connection is the one outstanding Caithness monument, the Ulbster cross-slab; the church where it stood has the interesting dedication to St Martin.

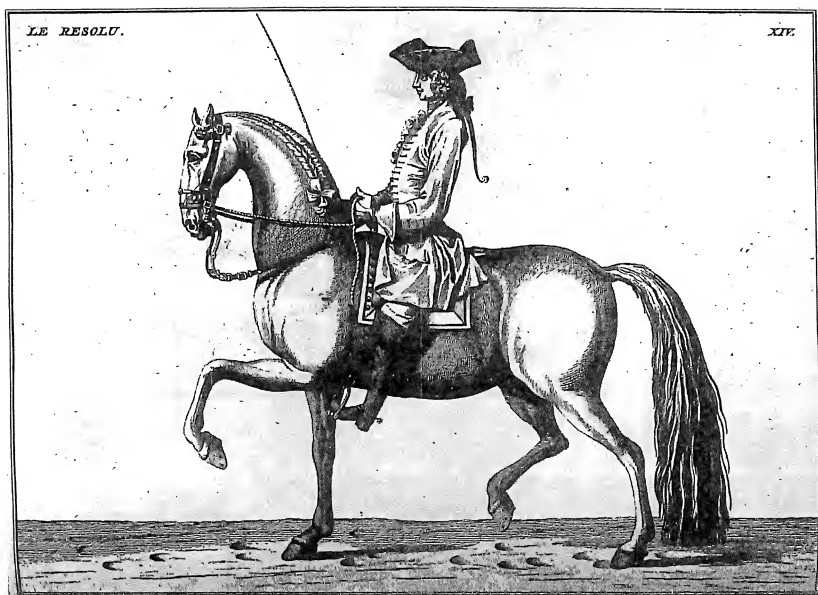
## Pictish Sculpture: Aristocratic Horsemanship

Portmahomack and places like it reveal something of the world of privilege and patronage which joined the Church and the secular power - King and aristocracy - in the century of stability and prosperity which ensued upon Egbert's re-structuring of the Pictish Church. That this relationship existed never should have been in any doubt; it is proclaimed by the corpus of Pictish Christian sculpture, arguably Northern Britain's greatest homegrown artistic achievement. The magnificent work we call Meigle 2 serves to show the intertwining of Divine and secular power. The monument of course is a cross, and on the face of the slab is the cross itself; and on the reverse there is a hunt scene. Below the hunt is Daniel in the lions' den; Daniel prefiguring Christ as King, in a pose suggesting lordship of creation (the pose is pagan in spirit, reminiscent of Classical depictions of Artemis as mistress of the animals). There was no difficulty about mixing up the Christian Cross, an Old Testament story, and an aristocratic hunt. There is of course a further dimension; the Pictish hunt, as has recently been explained (Carrington, 1996), carries a thoroughly mediaeval Christian symbolism. On a simpler level, it emphasizes the privileged status of a now leisured aristocracy.



Illus. 2.1  
Pictish stone from Meigle (5 rev.) showing  
horseman trotting (RCAHMS)

A smaller and more often overlooked cross-slab, Meigle 5, (illus.2.1) associates the cross simply with horsemanship, and this depiction is specially interesting in that it shows observation from life, and in doing so makes a social statement. There is a horseman riding along; the carving in this instance makes clear that it is the off foreleg which is leading, so the gait here is a trot. Not all Pictish horsemen trot, they often are shown at a kind of extended walk like the 'tölt' which Icelanders use: trotting (other than as a brief exercise) is energy-wasting and uncomfortable for both horse and rider



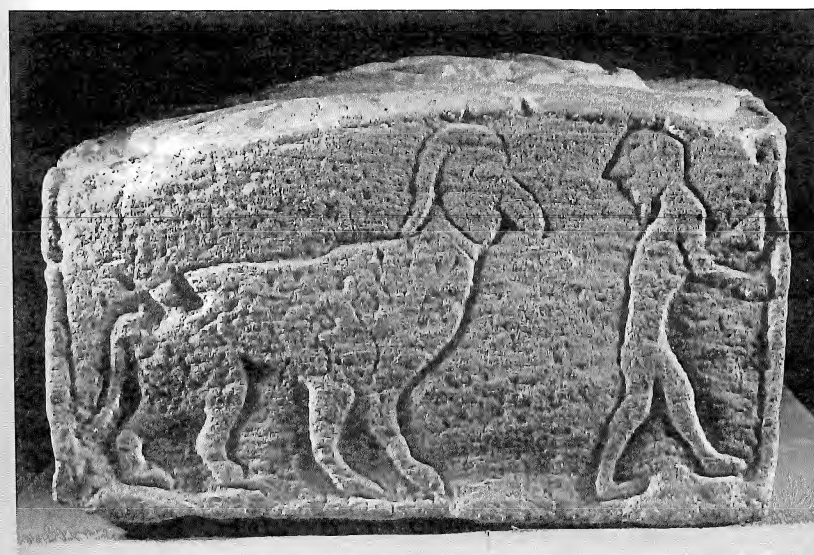
Illus. 2.2

Illustration of the extended trot from Eisenberg 1727 (Trustees of the NLS)

when practised stirrupless by a full-grown man on a thirteen-hand pony. The action is high-stepping and the stride long. Some commentators have remarked that the horse's tail is docked, but they misread the scene. It is, of course, a full-length tail, shown foreshortened; the pony is switching it sharply from side to side, and the sculptor has depicted it when it is towards us. The pony's mouth is open, resisting the bit. This rider is in the act of schooling his horse to extend the trot. It means increasing the impulsion while keeping the pony from breaking into a canter, so the rider tries to keep the horse's head down. The horse is getting what it takes as contradictory signals, and shows its irritation by switching its tail. Compare another aristocratic horseman practising this movement some nine hundred years later, in one of the classic dressage manuals, that of the Baron d'Eisenberg, 1727 (illus.2.2). Of the extended trot, Dorian Williams (1978) remarks: 'the horse's head should be carried level and steady. . . The horse should never be allowed to nod up and down: ideally too, the tail should not swish from side to side, or revolve, which denotes a certain resistance, whereas correctly there should be an impression of relaxed harmony'. The eighteenth-century French rider is shown with the gait perfected, but he

achieves it with a cavesson, which forces the head down by pressing on the sensitive nose; the high-set Pictish noseband allowed no such coercion.

These technicalities lead to observations of more general interest. As Alcock (1993, 230-1) has remarked about Pictish sculpture in general, the sculptor has observed this scene from life, and understands what is happening. This was what his patrons, whose appreciation of horsemanship was keen and critical, expected of him. Like a modern Pony Club handbook, the French manual shows the movement as it should be, 'dans sa perfection'; the Pictish sculptor shows the actuality. The Pictish aristocrat prefigures the French aristocrat in having the leisure time to school his horse beyond the mere basics of riding. Both riders are taking skills which originated as of utilitarian application on the battlefield, and are refining them into high art. This is not to suggest that the Picts practised classical haute-école, nor that this man is not still a member of a serious warrior-class. But he does not have to spend most of his time fighting, has time for leisurely pursuits, and the society of which he is a member has the taste and resources to give patronage to the visual arts.

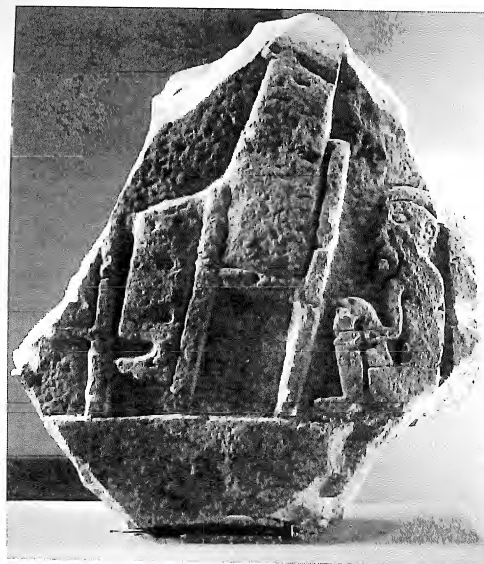


Illus. 2.3

Pictish stone from Meigle (26) showing man with beast following (RCAHMS)



Where does this lead? It is surprising that over all the years the Invergowrie stone has been known, it was left to Alcock (1993, 230-1), following a tentative lead given earlier by Stevenson, to point out that it is a cartoon, and one hardly flattering to the public image of the warrior-aristocracy. The modern equivalent would be the retired colonel who is affectionately humoured by the younger officers, and who likes gin. There is humour at Meigle too; no.26, the man looking over his shoulder, as well he may, but the beast which is following him,



Illus. 2.4  
Pictish stone from Meigle (27) showing sitting figure behind man on a tilted chair (RCAHMS)

is equally unsure what to do next (illus.2.3); and the Church can laugh at itself - no.27: a scene, perhaps, in a tedious chapter meeting (illus.2.4). What is the condition of a society whose ruling class can poke fun at itself in this way? It surely is a society in which the ruling class feels secure and its cherished institutions unthreatened; at the same time, it has become self-conscious, and may be dimly aware that things are on a downhill grade. The sketches of 'Snaffles', who epitomised the life of the British in 1920s India, were made in this spirit.

## Changing Worlds

By the middle of the ninth century the Pictish kingdom had given way to the Scottish dynasty of Kenneth MacAlpin. A lot of the best sculpture we have been considering, however, dates later than 800, and the lack of documentation should not predispose us against a Pictish kingdom which remained strong for four decades into the new century. Those who suggest that the Scottish takeover of 843 was essentially a dynastic coup, are probably right. But we now enter a time when things, more widely, appeared to be unravelling; the new force of the Vikings had appeared in northern Britain, and in England and in Francia, with Offa and Charlemagne long dead, the old confidence had given

way to uncertainty. Nechtan, entrusting Egbert, had put his kingdom firmly into the mainstream, sharing experiences, through Northumbria, with the Continent. The Scottish kingdom by comparison was insular in its outlook. There is a chronicle reference to Giric, who reigned in the 880s, as 'giving liberty to the Scottish Church, which had been in servitude after the manner of the Picts' (Skene 1867, 151). This implies some dismantling of the formidable structure of power of which Egbert had bolted together the framework. The motive may have been dynastic insecurity; the Pictish royal family and senior aristocracy may have woven themselves into the fabric of the Church so thoroughly that the Scottish king could remove what he perceived as a threat only by pulling apart the building.

Before the Scottish takeover, the Pictish kingdom, whose ruling class gave the highest social regard to horsemanship, found its distant dependencies in the north threatened from the sea. Probably through a deliberate policy of settling Scandinavian war-crews on estates, a more appropriately nautical warrior-class came to replace the Pictish one in Shetland and Orkney. In the homelands of Angus and Fife however, the dearth of Norse place-names suggests that the Vikings for a time were successfully resisted (although the coasts of this region offer as good landing-beaches as those of eastern England, where Scandinavian settlement was heavy). The reason surely is the simple one, that skilled cavalry, able to move swiftly to the scene of a landing, would have the edge on a crew who would be cold and stiff after a long voyage in an open ship. In this homeland, the Picts had a better than average chance of fending off Vikings. But reverses were increasingly inevitable, and the effort of resisting the threat from the sea, became a source of weakness which assisted the Scottish takeover.

When the Pictish kingdom was at the height of its power, the highly civilised life-style of its arts-patronising leisured classes, reflected the international quality of the cultural milieu in which men like Egbert moved. The significance of Egbert's international career for the arts especially has been stressed by George Henderson (1987, 94). He made Iona Catholic, spending the last thirteen years of his life as the most powerful man there, and earlier when in Ireland he had been sought out by important visitors from England. 'He prepared by political contacts abroad and financial resources at home, a highly effective mission from Ireland to the Low Countries and the Rhineland, vigorously manned by able English, Irish-trained priests and missionaries. His disciple Willibrord became archbishop of Utrecht with the co-operation of the

Pictland,  
55 Northumbria



Franks and the Papacy". His personal advice to Nechtan reformed the Pictish Church and by so doing, greatly strengthened the effectiveness of royal control over distant territories. In this respect, Pictish interests in the far north paralleled Frankish interests in the Netherlands and the Rhineland. The rulers of both kingdoms got the same advice and constructed parallel institutions. This was not surprising, as both had used the same consultant.

#### Thurso College

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## The Hallow Hill and the Origins of Christianity in Eastern Scotland

Edwina Proudfoot

### Introduction

From as early as the nineteenth century long cist cemeteries have been attributed to the Early Christian period, largely because they are unlike the burials of the Bronze and Iron Ages and they have not been found either in specifically Roman or in later medieval contexts, associated with ecclesiastical buildings of the thirteenth century or later date. Moreover, they lie in rows, with a general east-west orientation and the burials are normally unaccompanied, as is normal in Christian burial. Evidence from a number of excavations, and, in particular an increasing number of radiocarbon dates, has shown that long cist cemeteries do span the post-Roman period to the twelfth century (Proudfoot, 1996, 422; Hill, 1997, 596).

While the Picts have been conceived as enigmatic but colourful, at least some of whom became Christian, the long cist cemeteries often have been regarded as unrewarding to study, intransigent and all alike; yet the Picts and long cists were largely contemporary with the introduction of Christianity to the east coast area, right at the beginning of the formative years of religious and political development of what is now Scotland. In this paper I explore the archaeological contexts of long cist cemeteries and consider the complicated nature of Early Christianity in the St Andrews and east coast area.

Ninianic, Columban, Northumbrian as well as possibly post-Roman influences are all present and influenced the conversion of eastern Scotland, the *origins* in my title. All these components of the Early Christian period have been extensively documented elsewhere (eg Thomas 1981) and can only be summarily referred to here as background to closer examination of the context of the long cist cemeteries.

## Perceptions of conversion

William Hole's dramatic representation of Columba preaching to the Picts (illus.3.1) highlights one romantic, nineteenth-century view of the possible conversion of the Picts by Columba. This shows Bridei sitting on a carved stone throne, a precursor of the Stone of Destiny, perhaps, surrounded by his warriors and tribesmen. The setting is apparently a stone circle, with implied druidic connotations, while the scene is dramatic in a Wagnerian sense. Written sources indicate only that they met, not that Bridei was converted by Columba



Illus 3.1

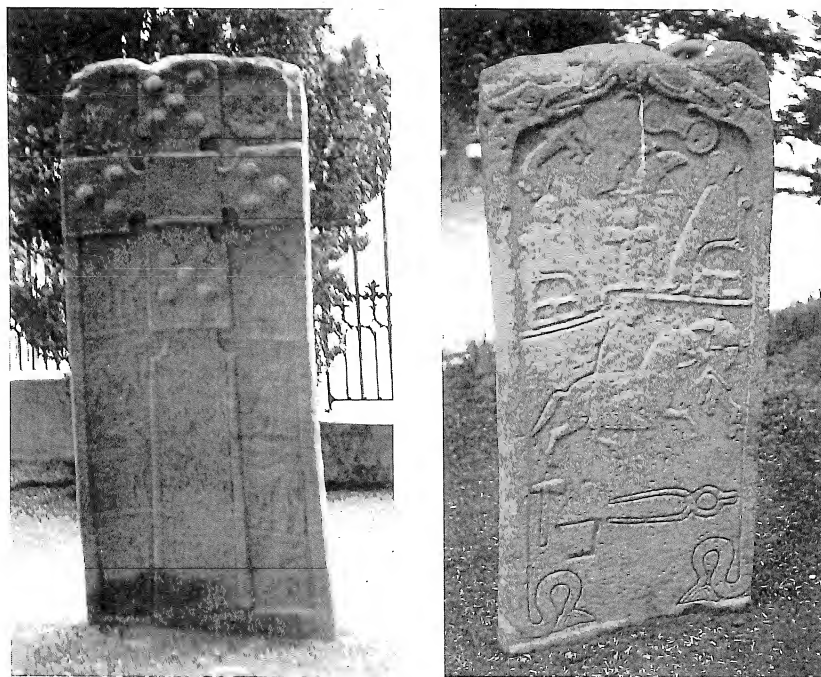
'St Columba preaching to the Picts' by William Hole  
(Reproduced by kind permission of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery)

(Anderson 1922, i, 48) and there is no historical justification for this powerful portrayal, although it does capture an aspect of the tension between pagan and Christian that surely happened many times during the conversion period and on which sources are silent. We do not know where the meeting between Bridei and Columba took place, since the written records do not tell us, (Smyth, 1984, 103) but the fort at Craig Phadraig, overlooking Inverness has been one of some half dozen sites claimed as contenders.

More generally the historical records offer limited factual information. Smyth (1984, 103) summarises Columba's role; he founded monasteries in the west from his base on Iona and with his followers travelled to north Pictland, where he met Bridei. Columba did not convert the northern Picts, although his followers introduced Celtic Christianity in the north east from the seventh century. Both historical and archaeological records, inadequate though they may be, offer glimpses of the spread of Celtic Christianity, although so far early churches or chapels have not been convincingly linked with known tribal or domestic sites.

While Columba is linked with the introduction of Christianity to the west and to northern Pictland the major Christianising of the south west of Scotland has been attributed to St Ninian (eg McQueen, 1961, 21). This is not the occasion to take forward the discussion about who Ninian was, or whether he existed, but at Whithorn a strong focus for the Early Christian Church developed, clearly derived from the sub-Roman world (Hill 1997). Moreover, missionary work from Whithorn spread across the Borders and reached at least as far as the Catstane in Midlothian, (Rutherford, 1972, 183). The date for these sites is sixth century, earlier than the Columban developments on Iona and in the west and north. Thomas (1981, ch11) has summarised the archaeological evidence for the early church in Scotland, while recent work by Hill (1997) has produced much supporting data about the particular development at Whithorn and for the church in the south west of Scotland. In addition there is a strong Northumbrian Christianising influence in Scotland, as Bede (*HE*, iv) states. While it is clear that Northumbrian activity was important in the south west, it also reached the Forth (*HE*, iv, 26), where the monastery of Abercorn had been founded, and as far as the Tay, as carved stones such as those at Aberlemno (eg Foster, 1996, illus. 69) demonstrate.

Nowhere is the perception of the arrival of Christianity more confused or more obvious than on many of the carved stones of the Picts. The Pictish symbols and animals depicted on the early, Class I stones become marginalised, and are later dropped from the repertoire of the Class II stones. As the Class II stone at Dunfallandy (illus.3.2) shows, we are dealing with a community in transition from pagan to Christian and clearly Christianity was winning the propaganda battle. Later, Class III stones carried crosses and were decorated with interlace designs but not with symbols or animals. How long it took to win the war is beyond the scope of this paper.



a)

b)

Illus 3.2

The Class II Pictish Stone from Dunfallandy, Perthshire

- a) The cross dominates the obverse, there are no Pictish symbols and the animals are marginalised  
 b) On the reverse the cross and the two clerics form a strong central theme, with the Pictish symbols spread above and below them.  
 (Photos: Edwina E. Proudfoot)

However, while the art history of Dunfallandy and other stones can be used to explore ideas and influences, the archaeological context for the erection of these stones is still a matter of substantial debate. Few stones remain *in situ*, few have a secure archaeological environment and none can be shown to have been erected within a royal or tribal enclosure, whether near a shrine, church or burial, although the current work at Tarbat may answer some questions of context (Carver 1997). Concentrations of stones, such as those at St Vigean, Meigle or St Andrews do suggest local or regional concentrations of wealth and power.

## The Hallow Hill

The settlements which the Hallow Hill long cist cemetery served have not yet been identified. No nearby enclosure has been found; there are no carved stones from the site or nearby, save at St Andrews; nor are there artefacts attributable to the Pictish period. Few settlements or other sites in the local area can be dated to the post-Roman period, although the wealth of *Pit-* place names suggests that Picts flourished throughout Fife (Whittington, 1968). At the Hallow Hill there was no specific artefactual evidence of the Picts, but the burials were of Picts by virtue of their date and location. Moreover, by the seventh century, to which the site is dated by radiocarbon dating they could have become Christian, as implied by the construction and layout of the oriented burials.

The closest settlement, known from an aerial photograph only, lies to the south of the Hallow Hill, on Wester Balrymonth Hill, but the round houses there could belong to several different periods and are not necessarily Pictish. The relationship between the Hallow Hill and any early settlement on the coast to the east, at St Andrews, is far from clear. There may have been settlement on the 'king's ridge', Kilrymonth, although the evidence for this, and, indeed, the area designated by the place name, are matters of debate. Within the burgh there has been little casual observation of sites disturbed during building, etc, while no systematic archaeological excavation has taken place and no settlement or house remains of early historic date are known there or within the Cathedral precinct. An earthwork, the Dane's Dyke, ran along the cliff at its highest point, presumably part of a settlement enclosure in the area that later became known as the *clachan*, to the north-east of the Cathedral enclosure. This enclosure might itself reflect the Pictish royal site

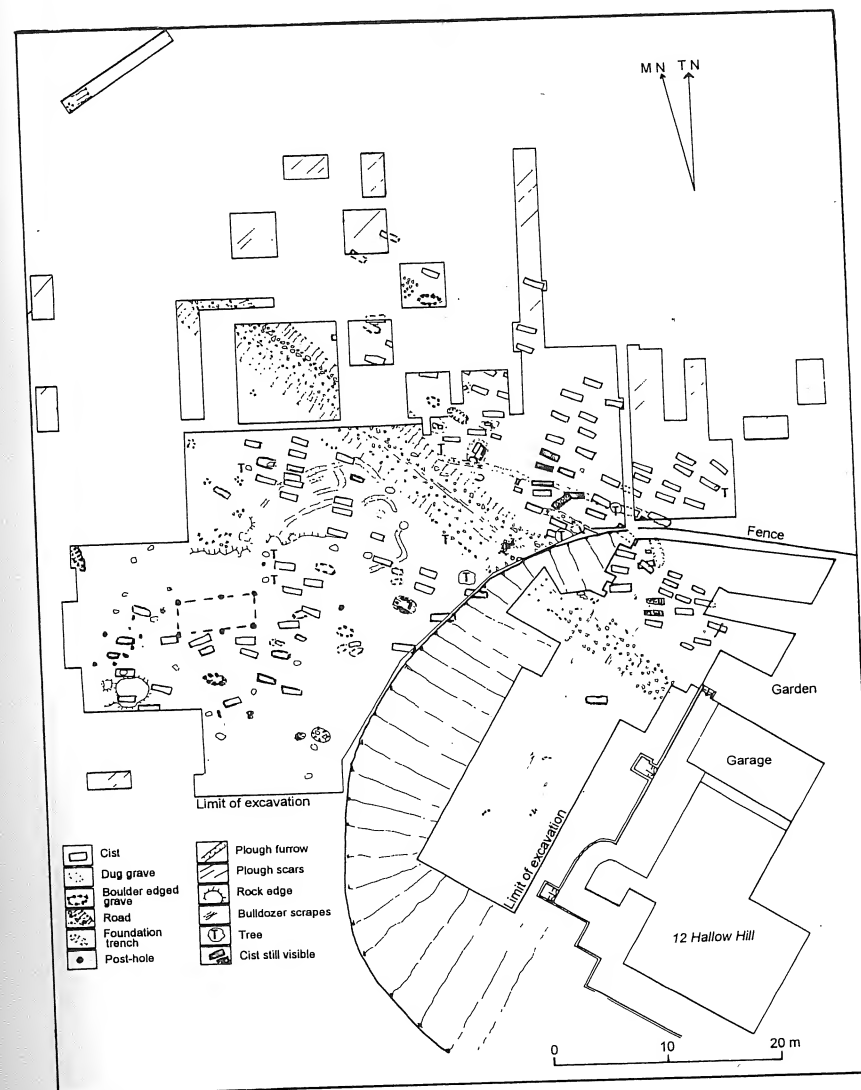
which otherwise could have been located where the cathedral was later built, with St Rule's and St Mary of the Rock on what could have been Kilrymonth.

That there were early historic settlements or religious sites in the vicinity of Kilrymonth can hardly be doubted since several small long cist cemeteries have been found in the area. One was just outside the Cathedral precinct, where a hog-back tomb-stone was unearthed last century from below medieval buildings of the former St Leonards College; it is now in the Cathedral Museum. Another long cist cemetery was discovered close to the west precinct boundary of the Cathedral at the east end of North Street, under the destroyed St Peter's Chapel (Hay Fleming, 1894, 84-5), which lies on the south edge of the *clachan*. In addition, several long cists were among, and earlier than the extensive later graveyard associated with the complex church site known as St Mary of the Rock.

#### *The long cist cemetery*

The excavation at the Hallow Hill (Proudfoot, 1996, 387-454) (illus.3.3) revealed a cobbled road which appeared to pre-date the burials. At least two graves, one on either side of the road, contained Roman objects and have been interpreted as possibly foundation graves.

Regrettably no grave-markers, crosses or Pictish carved stones were found at the Hallow Hill and at the time of the excavation, from 1975-77, no Pictish burials had been recognised in eastern Scotland. Later, the first long cist under a square cairn at Dunrobin (Ashmore, 1980, 346-55; Close Brooks, 1980, 328-49) and the cemetery of round and square barrows, each containing one long grave, at White Bridge, near Inverness (Foster, 1996, illus 10) led to further discoveries, many of them through aerial photography and all thought to be Pictish. Several of the earlier graves at the Hallow Hill could be of this nature. The nineteenth-century report and the recent excavation suggest that the child (Cist 51B) buried with Roman artefacts in a small, deep long cist, appeared to have been under a cairn and the second, a two-tier massive dug-grave, contained a child burial with Roman artefacts (Cist 54 lower), similarly associated with many large stones suggestive of a cairn. Another grave (Grave 119), cut more than a metre into the sub-soil, included so many stones in the fill and surrounding area that it, also, could have been covered by a cairn. Certainly these graves differed in form, and presumably in ritual, from the remaining long cist graves at the Hallow Hill.



Illus 3.3  
Plan of the main excavated features at the Hallow Hill long cist cemetery  
(E. Proudfoot)



These few, possibly pagan Pictish graves, and others no longer recognisable, could have been the earliest in the cemetery at the Hallow Hill. They occupy prominent locations within the cemetery, but do not relate well to the majority of the rows of long cists (illus.3.3) or to the traces of the small structure to the west, where post-holes delimited a small building around which a number of oriented long cists were uncovered, although they could not be shown to relate to the building. (Proudfoot, 1996, 396-8)

This small east-west oriented structure, three metres wide by seven metres long, located near the highest part of the Hallow Hill (Proudfoot 1996, illus 8) has been interpreted as a chapel/church site, although only substantial post-holes had survived the centuries of agricultural activity which had destroyed all possible stratigraphy or associations. However, the location of the structure and its proportions have led to the suggestion that this could be the lost site of *eglesnamin*. An early church of this name is mentioned as church property in 1144 but the site of the building was not known. For documentary reasons set out elsewhere, (Proudfoot, 1996, 396) it has been argued that no structure could have been built in that area from at least the twelfth century.



Illus 3.4

The Hallow Hill long cist cemetery during excavation, showing the cists on both sides of the road, view to the west. (Photo: E. Proudfoot)

The long cist cemetery at the Hallow Hill is typical of the majority of such sites (illus.3.4), in that it is not clearly associated with any settlements, yet with 150 cists surviving, from an estimated maximum of 500, the site could have served one or more communities over several hundred years. Based on a small sample of 19 burials, the radiocarbon date-range shows a bias towards the seventh century (Proudfoot, 1996, 423), continuing in the eighth century, but by the ninth century effectively it had ceased to be used.

The rows of long cists are neat, well-spaced and generally well-made. There was some clustering of graves, possibly of family groups or perhaps representing all the burials of a particular year (illus.3.4). The cists were all constructed in the same manner, normally with stone base, sides, ends and cover, of sandstone brought from the coast, approximately one and a half miles to the east. This implies considerable social organisation over the long period during which burials took place. The similarity of cist construction and the absence of finds or grave goods suggest that all Christian members of the settlement were interred in the same manner. There are few points in history when such an idea could have been practicable. It is the size of the long cist cemeteries, the implied social organisation and care for the dead that identify long cist and dug-grave cemeteries as conceptually different from earlier burial sites, although some pagan long cists have been found, but singly or in small numbers, for example at Airlie, Angus, where one of three long cists was accompanied by a Roman glass vessel (Davidson, 1886).

### The context of the Hallow Hill

The Hallow Hill is situated 2.4 km (1.5 miles) from the coast on the south bank of the Kinness Burn at its confluence with the Cairnsmill Burn. This is a striking site (illus. 3.5) and its topography is typical of sites preferred by the early Church, of which Old Maelros is perhaps the best known example (Thomas, 1971, fig 11).

Few long cist cemeteries have been recorded in detail and only Audrey Henshall's (1955, 252-83) seminal study, following her excavation at Parkburn has suggested the broad context in which the Hallow Hill and similar long cist cemeteries should be considered. Like the Hallow Hill, Parkburn was a damaged site, and considerable evidence was irrecoverable. In recent years there have been other excavations, at the Catstane (Cowie, 1978) for example,



Illus 3.5

Aerial view of the Hallow Hill on its low ridge-of-end site, surrounded by the Cairnsmill Burn and the Kinness Burn. View to the south. (Photo: J. Nowak-Solinski)

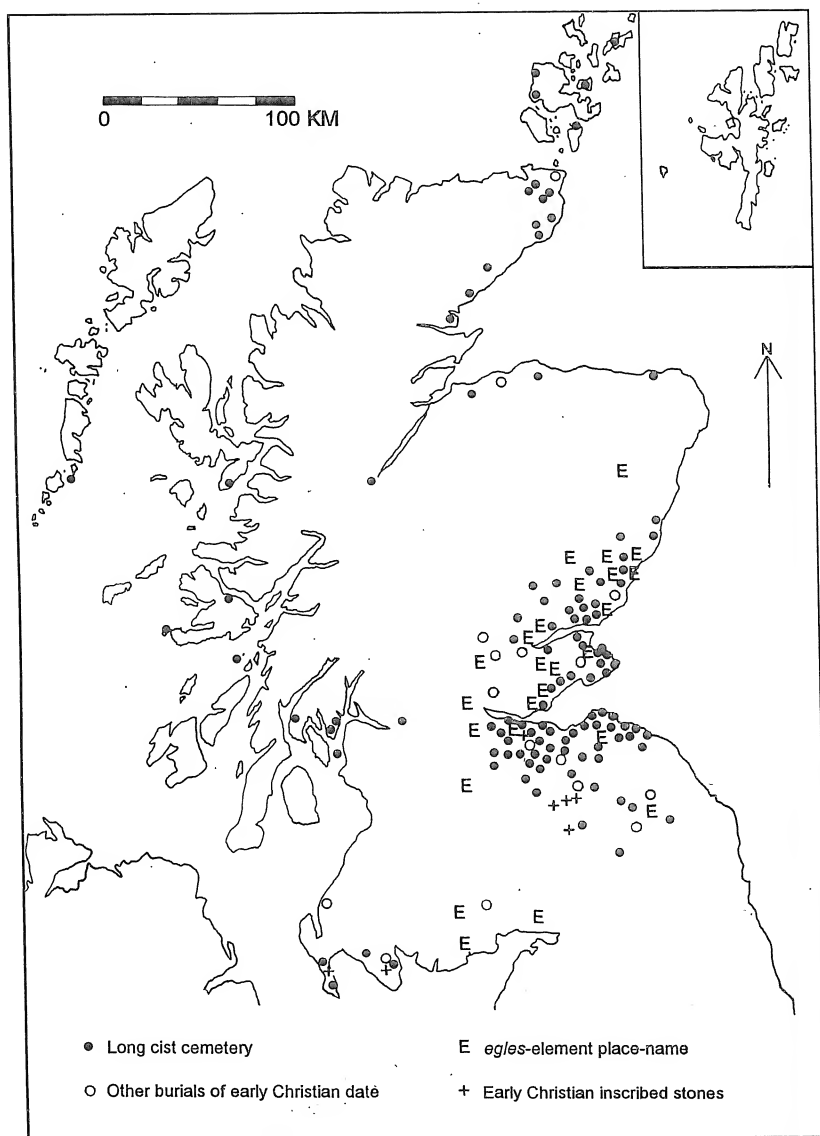
and there are more recent investigations, such as Longniddry and Linlithgow (Dalland, 1992 and 1993) as well as a recently-excavated site at Thornybank, near Dalkeith (Rees, 1997, 53). However, the numerous long cist cemeteries discovered in the nineteenth century, mainly around the coasts of Lothian, Fife and Angus (Proudfoot, 1996, 445, illus 28) provided the foundations for subsequent work. Their discovery had much to do with development - railways in particular. Nevertheless, as more sites have been found, the distribution pattern has not changed significantly and it does appear that a largely coastal distribution reflects reality.

Radiocarbon dates increasingly support the suggestion that the *floruit* of long cist burials lay between the fifth and tenth centuries, the period when conversion to Christianity was taking place (Hill, 1997, 596), but few sites which span the transition from pagan to Christian have been identified. St Ninian's Point, Bute, (Aitken, 1955, 62-77) may be such a site. Situated near the end of the promontory at the west end of St Ninian's Bay is a small circular earthen enclosure, within which a small chapel had been built. Two extended burials were found, one in front of the altar and the other outside the door of the chapel, while to the east of the chapel a group of burials in long graves was

uncovered, the majority lying east-west, but two were north-south. One north-south burial (H) was clearly earlier than the overlying east-west burial (I). The second north-south burial (L) lay outside the enclosure and a fragment of jet armlet was found beside the bones. This evidence suggests that the north-south burials could have been pagan and that the site was superseded by the chapel and its associated burials. Although no radiocarbon dates are available for this site it has been dated to the Early Christian period because of the associated chapel, with the north-south burials indicating earlier use of the site.

Long cists seem to have been the norm in the east of Scotland, although an increasing number has been recognised along the western seaboard, at Galson, Lewis (Stevenson, 1991, 106), Gairloch (Stevenson, 1991, 106), Kirkmaiden, Galloway (Livens, 1957, 85), Barhobble, Mochrum (Cormack, 1995, 34), and Whithorn (Hill, 1997, 90). They are relatively rare elsewhere, although they do occur sporadically in England and they are more frequent in Wales and Ireland. Although there is a general similarity in the construction of long cists throughout Scotland there are local variations and long cists do occur along with dug graves. At Whithorn (Hill, 1997, 90) a variety of stone and wooden structures, spanning several centuries, was uncovered. Dug graves fill the same chronological position in many places, especially in the west, for example at Trohoughton, near Dumfries (Simpson, 1964, 125) or Dunmisk Fort, County Tyrone (Ivens, 1989, 18; 55).

Few long cist or dug grave cemeteries have been examined under modern conditions and the sites have been considered in isolation, without reference to possible structures or to the wider landscape. As Thomas (1981, 30) indicates, for fuller understanding we need to take account of the cults and physical environment of the earliest phases of Christianity. Any building could be utilised for worship and so the need for a dedicated church building was not necessarily important, but community and salvation were. This led to burial practice reverting to inhumation, instead of the cremation practised among the Roman cults. Accordingly there was a desire to be buried near other Christians. This also accounts for the presence in the landscape of extensive inhumation cemeteries, where a group of burials, all oriented could be envisaged as offering security on the day of judgement, ensuring the individuals would be recognised as Christian. There is merit in this suggestion in Scotland, with its small isolated communities which were far from Rome.



Illus 3.6

Map showing the distribution of long cists, *egles* place names and inscribed stones. The distribution is markedly coastal and southern in the territory of the southern Picts, with virtually no sites in the north-east.

Air photographs taken in recent years have revealed a number of cemeteries. Whether of long cists or long graves is not known without excavation, but these new discoveries again emphasise the eastern and lowland coastal distribution of long cist cemeteries from the Lothians, around the Fife and Angus coasts, with a scatter along the Moray coast and northwards to Orkney (illus.3.6). There is a noticeable gap in the north east (Proudfoot, 1996, 445, illus. 28). This distribution is to a large extent complementary to that of Class I Pictish stones (Alcock, 1988, 2, map 1). If these distributions are at least in part contemporary they reflect the complexity of Christianisation, showing areas where the Christian practice of long cist cemeteries was established at an early date. Again, the distribution of *egles* place names is largely peripheral to the distribution of long cist cemeteries in the east of Scotland (illus. 3.6).

The long cist cemeteries are located on better quality land in both eastern and southern Scotland. In seeking the Christian origins of the long cist cemeteries it should be noted that these were the areas most traversed by the Romans at an earlier date. As in the south of Britain there could have been a few Roman Christians remaining even after the abandonment of the north. Evidence for Christianity or for a post-Roman church has not survived here and it is difficult to estimate the kind of evidence we need to seek. Such evidence for Christianity as we have, from Traprain Law, for example, is at best ambiguous. Fourth century silver with biblical scenes had been damaged in readiness for breaking up. This material has been claimed as plunder, and inadmissible, therefore, as evidence for Christianity in the area (Thomas, 1981, 102). This is probably the most valid interpretation of the material in the present state of knowledge. However, the question remains as to the origins of this silver. It may have been of Gaulish manufacture, but it could have come from a wealthy Roman site in North Britain, where there were Christians. Roman forts such as Cramond, Inveresk or Newstead, for example, could have housed Christians from an early date. There are long cist or long grave cemeteries near Inveresk at Edgebucklin Braes (ONB, 1852, 27) and at Cowpits Farm (Aliaga-Kelly, 1986, 226), unexcavated and therefore undated, but they need to be reassessed in studying the continuing development of the sub-Roman landscape of post-Roman south-east Scotland.

An archaeologically and historically well-documented Christian influence in the Lothians is Northumbrian where there are Anglo-Saxon sites, such as

Dunbar, (Perry, 1993, 55), near which are several long cist and grave cemeteries such as Luggate (Norman, 1884, 463) and Whittinghame (Chalmers, 1810, 2). Doon Hill (Hope Taylor, 1966, 175) and Yeaverling (Hope Taylor, 1977) are both sites where long cists/graves occur and where early church sites have been identified, while at Moreham (an Anglian place name) there is an Anglian carved stone and two long cists were discovered in the graveyard, both with Anglian beads (Patullo, 1928, 165; 1934, 16). Excavation and other detailed studies of the area are needed to provide the broader context for these finds but this rare find of long cists, with Anglian artefacts, in a Christian graveyard, highlights the possibilities for further investigation. Long cist cemeteries have not been found in Southern Northumbria and so the influence for the development of long cist cemeteries must lie elsewhere.

The distribution of long cist cemeteries, representing communities of Christians, correlates poorly with either the sphere of influence of Columban followers or of those from the Ninianic south-west. However, Ninianic influence can be traced to a limited extent via the inscribed stones, such as the Latinus stone (Thomas, 1971, 99) and others in the south west which date to the mid fifth century; there is also the stone of the *sacerdos* Naitano near Peebles (Thomas, 1981, 292). The most northerly of these inscribed stones is the Catstane in Mid Lothian (Cowie, 1978). The context of these stones is well understood in the south west and their route northwards is clear, but their position within the overall introduction of Christianity is not. That the stones are Christian cannot be doubted, but only at the Catstane is there an association with a long cist cemetery.

Thomas (1981, 292) points to Bede's claim that the Picts had received Christianity at an early date and suggests that the long cist cemeteries and the inscribed stones, such as the Catstane could reflect this episode. The long cists can be traced all round the Fife coast and other evidence is beginning to emerge, although the chronology is unclear. At Kilrenny, the Skeith stone (Proudfoot, 1995) has scarcely attracted attention until recently, but this stone is carved with an equal-arm cross in the Whithorn style, complete with chi-rho symbol and enclosed within a circle. It stands in the open fields, near to its original site, along an old road leading from the west towards the site of Kilrenny. Kilrenny church sits on the end of a natural mound, surrounded by water, a typical Early Christian site, a similar topography to the Hallow Hill, for example. R.Trench Jellicoe (1998 and forthcoming) has examined the aerial

photographs of the Kilrenny area and has identified a large curvilinear enclosure and other related features around Kilrenny. In addition, two interlace carved fragments, probably from the one stone (Proudfoot, 1995), have been found in recent years in the vicinity of the east of the Kilrenny enclosure, suggesting that this could be part of an important early complex.

Many other early sites, such as Caipie Caves and Constantine's Cave, (Wace and Jehu, 1915, 233) both with numerous simple crosses, and Kinkell Cave (Wace and Jehu, 1915, 233) where there were simple early crosses scratched on a sandstone slab, link the long cists with the other Early Christian evidence. Also, at Fife Ness a substantial earthwork, the Dane's Dyke, encloses the tip of the peninsula and Constantine's Cave, forming another major enclosure, although its purpose is not yet understood. These sites have only recently come to prominence, in part because of the discovery of the Kilrenny stone fragments.

## Conclusion

The evidence for the arrival of Christianity in the Lothians, Fife and Angus, is in the process of reassessment in the light of the recent work at the Hallow Hill. The influences are numerous and uneven, but increasingly the argument can be made that the role of Whithorn and Ninian may have been more significant than has been considered feasible. Thus the origins of Christianity at the Hallow Hill, and at other long-cist cemetery sites, should perhaps be sought in the south and south-west and in those areas where Christianity continued into the post-Roman period.

## Acknowledgment ~~~~~

I want to acknowledge my debt to many archaeologists and historians who have written about differing aspects of the subject but Professor Geoffrey Barrow and Dr Marjory Anderson encouraged me initially and offered unfailing support as my ideas about the Hallow Hill developed. I wish also to thank Chris Aliaga-Kelly, whose research has proved so stimulating and I also wish to thank my husband for his unfailing encouragement.

St Andrews Heritage Services



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## Pilgrims to St Ethernan: the Archaeology of an early Saint of the Picts and Scots

Peter A Yeoman

### Abstract

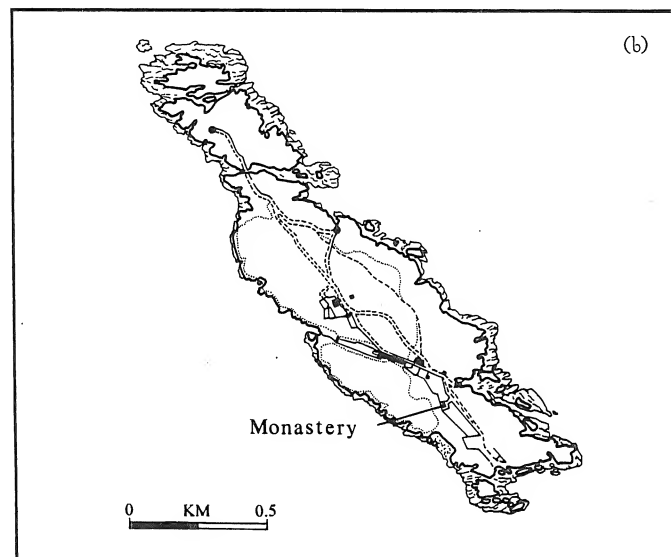
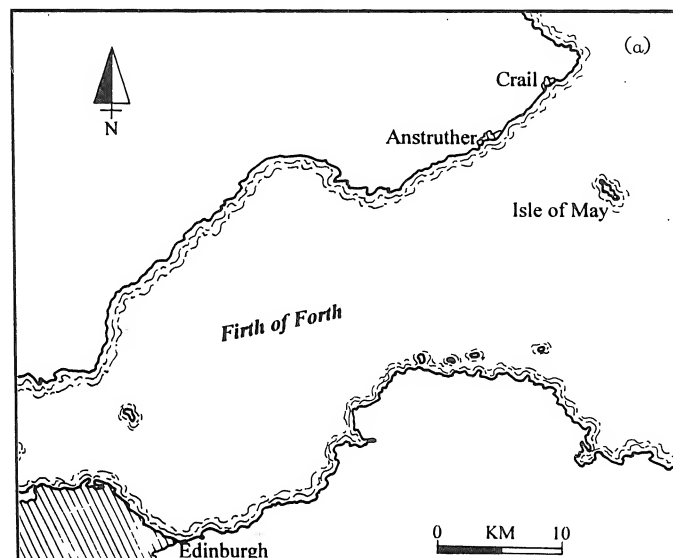
*Rarely can archaeology pursue such intangible subjects as the reality of an almost forgotten early saint, and the pilgrimage associated with his shrine; least of all can this be attempted in south-east Scotland, where the early church sites are rarely available for investigation. The recently completed five year campaign of excavations on the Isle of May in the Firth of Forth has revealed convincing evidence of the occupation of the site by Christian communities from at least the seventh century, and has uncovered some of the earliest ecclesiastical buildings ever found in the south-east. A contribution is thus made to the debate regarding the conversion of the southern Picts to Christianity.*

*Ithernan [and Corindu] died among the Picts  
Annals of Ulster AD 669*

With this simple obit announcement an early chronicler introduced the name of a man, who may have played a significant role in the conversion of the southern Picts, and whose name was to become inextricably linked with the Isle of May (Anderson, 1922, 180). This island site, 7 km off the coast of Fife (referred to colloquially as 'the May'), has been the subject of a five year programme of excavations, and for the first time an opportunity now exists to combine the hagiographical and historical record with the results of the archaeological investigations (illus 4.1).

### Records of Ethernan

For Ethernan's death to be recorded in the contemporary chronicle being kept at Iona, suggests that he was either a noteworthy noble or a cleric; the use of the name in early church dedications would seem to rule out the former. Boyle quite reasonably suggests that '...Iona's interest in Ethernan may have been that he was trained there to work in Pictland' (Boyle, 1981, 60). The name is rare, being of either Irish or Pictish origin (T. Clancy pers. comm.). The only



Illus 4.1  
Location maps of a) the Isle of May and b) monastery site

other contemporary records, probably from the seventh or eighth centuries, are four symbol and other stones with inscriptions which translate as *Ethernanus*. The Scoonie stone from near Leven in Fife (30 km west of the Isle of May), is inscribed in ogham with - EDDARRNONN (Allen & Anderson 1903, 347). Identical ogham lettering, minus the last N, appears on the stone from Brodie, Moray, now in Inverness Museum (ibid, 132-3). A third class II stone from Fordoun (Kincardine) features an inscription in the Roman alphabet, transcribed as *pidarnoin* (ECMS ii, 202). The fourth inscription occurs on the Newton stone in the Garioch, Aberdeenshire, which has been transcribed as IDDARRNNN (Forsyth, 1996, 435). The personal name Ethernan is derived from a Latin loan-word meaning 'eternal' or 'the eternal one', reflecting a core belief of the Christian faith. Forsyth suggests a range of possibilities for completing the meaning of the inscriptions as follows:- 'Ethernan (made this cross)', '(this cross is dedicated to) Ethernan', '(pray for) Ethernan', or '(in memory of) Ethernan' (1996, 492).

There are a number of placenames and early church dedications which feature his name, the great majority of which are south of the Mounth (Grampian mountains). The most significant placename is *Kilrenny*, on the Fife coast due north of the May, which is probably an early eighth-century name meaning 'church/chapel of Ethernan' (Taylor, 1996, 99). New discoveries and research around Kilrenny have further strengthened the case for there being an early monastic site here, presumably centred on the site of the later medieval church. Two pieces of a cross slab, probably of eighth-century date, have been found just to the east of the village. Trench-Jellicoe has noted the presence of a cropmark enclosure, visible from aerial photographs on the west side of the village, which might represent a bank and ditch (RAF verticals, ref 67 304, 7th August 1967 in NMRS). He has placed this evidence in the context of the Skeith Stone, a seventh-century(?) cross slab incised with a marigold cross, which stands 1km to the west of the church. He interprets this as a boundary stone proclaiming the approach to the entrance through a monastic *vallum* (Trench-Jellicoe forthcoming). Just to the east, within the same parish, lie the Caipie Caves which are historically associated with St Adrian (Ethernan) by Wyntoun in his *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland*, written around 1420. This group of sea caves feature man-made modifications to walls and entrances, and there are antiquarian records of the discovery of Pictish symbols within the caves, which are now almost obliterated. The walls also feature groups of

roughly incised crosses, which are characteristic of later medieval pilgrimage activity. A cemetery of east-west burials in front of the caves was also reported in the nineteenth century; it is possible that this was a long-cist cemetery (Stuart, 1866, lxxxviii-xc).

*Aithernie*, in the same parish as the Scoonie stone, may be a corruption of the saint's name. At Lathrisk in the Howe of Fife, the de Bernham rededication of 1242 includes 'St Atherniscus', which is not the same as Ethernan, but is very close. One explanation for this has been suggested to me by Simon Taylor, that it may be a hypocoristic form of the saint's name which has gone on to develop a separate identity and cult, a process found in both Scotland and Ireland (O'Riain, 1977). Confusion can also arise when considering the dedication of the twelfth-century parish church of Leuchars (Fife) to *St Athernaise*, a name which was identified in the nineteenth century with a separate Irish saint, although Taylor now believes this to be a case of mistaken identity, and that the dedication was in fact to our saint from the May (pers. comm.). Outwith Fife, mention should be made of St Ethernan's Church at Madderty in Perthshire. This was the *Ecclesiam Sancti Ethernani de Madernin*, which was granted along with several other churches by Earl Gilbert of Strathearn to Inchaffray Abbey around 1200, the dedication being considerably earlier than this (Inchaffray Charters 1906,6). The placename - *Madderty* - is itself a corruption of the Saint's name.

We must traverse the Mounth once more to consider the only other evidence for Ethernan being held in reverence in the north-east Scotland, presumably resulting from his missionary activities there. All the principle secondary sources cite the dedication to St Ethernan at the church of Rathin in Buchan, and the traditional location of his hermitage, at St Ethernan's Slack in the same parish (Forbes 1882, 333-4; MacKinlay 1904, 140-1; and Watson 1926, 321). Much of this was culled from the Aberdeen Breviary, collected by Bishop Elphinstone in 1509, who styles the saint as 'Bishop and Confessor', having been written with a clear propagandist agenda to create a Scottish usage complete with a full complement of native saints and cults. This promotional element can sometimes be taken too literally, as in Jackson's (1955, 139-40) view when he repeats an earlier reference to Ethernan as the 'founder and first Bishop of Rathin'. Devotion to the early cult in the north-east seems to have been maintained into the later medieval period by the Earls of Buchan. A late thirteenth-century charter of Alexander Comyn, Earl of Buchan records an

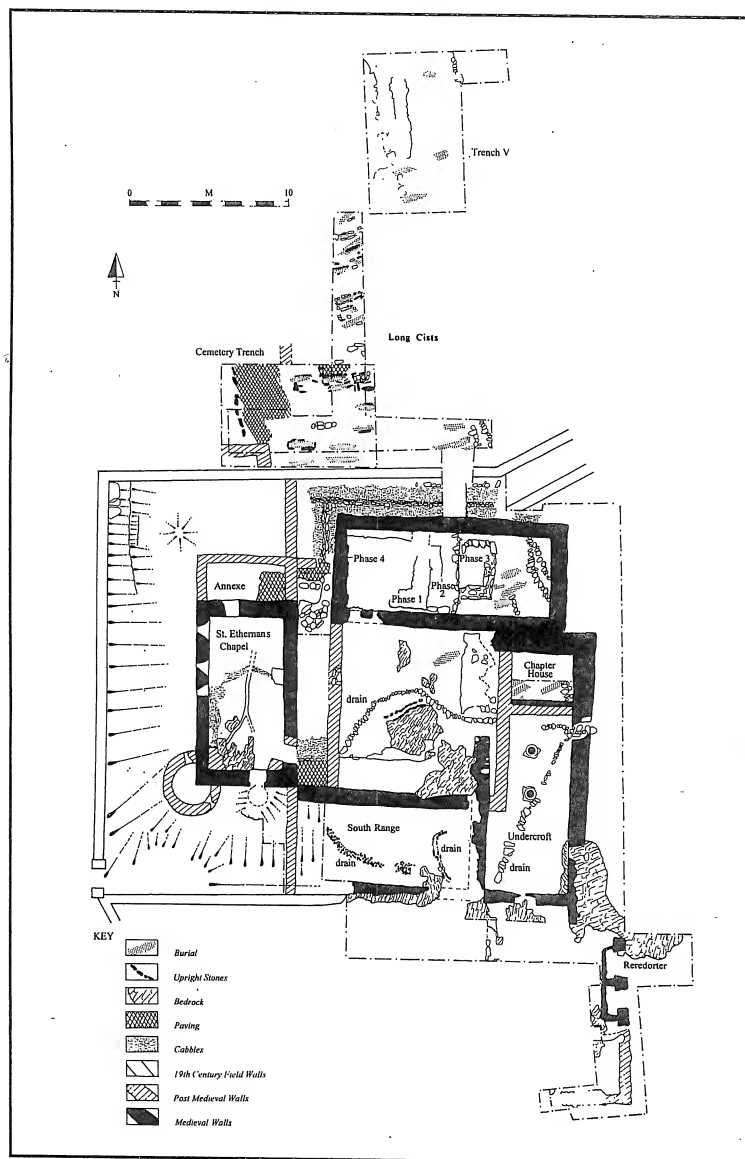
annual payment 'for the lights of St Ethernan's [chapel/altar] of the Isle of May' (Stuart, 1868, 18-19, no. 27).

The known distribution of sculptured stones and places associated with Ethernan, runs around the coast from Moray south into Perthshire, but with a major concentration in Fife. It would be tempting to propose that if Ethernan were a monk from Iona, he had travelled up the Great Glen, eventually ending his days as a famed holy man in Fife, buried on the Isle of May. Equally, he may have travelled the well-trodden route from Iona east towards Lindisfarne in the 640s, with missions to the north-east. We cannot even be certain of his link with Iona. Of course, it is impossible to be sure that all of these stones, placenames and dedications commemorate the same individual, or that this individual is the Ethernan who died in 669.

### The Adrian Enigma

But there is a problem - the saint revered by the later pilgrims, including James IV who visited on a number of occasions, was known as *Adrian*, and not Ethernan. This radical change of identity had taken place at some time between the charter of the Earl of Buchan of the 1280s, referred to above, and Wyntoun writing his chronicle in the early fifteenth century. The latter author adds further confusion, which is repeated in the Aberdeen Breviary, by stating that St Adrian was murdered on the May by the Danes in 875 (Skene, 1867, clxi), for which there is no corroborative early historical source. This enigma can be dealt with quite simply - the two saints are one and the same, and the ninth-century date for his death is a red herring. For whatever reason, during the regularisation of the Calendars by the Scottish church which would have accompanied the promotion of native cults in the fourteenth century, the more familiar Latin saint's name of Adrian (of Fife) 'was inserted in Scottish Calanders on 4th March, being the Feast more widely attributed [in Europe] to St Adrian of Nicomedia' (Dove, 1988, 130). Although Wyntoun gives a somewhat garbled account of the early historic period, he did have access to early sources in St Andrews. He may not have been so far off the mark, as there was a major Viking incursion in 875 (see below) and he may have conflated a real massacre of clergy on the May at this time with a wished-for martyrdom of Ethernan/Adrian (A.A.M. Duncan pers. comm.).





Illus. 4.2

Plan of excavations on the Isle of May, completed in 1996, showing early burials and churches in relation to the later Benedictine Priory

## Excavations on The May

At the time of writing, the full results of the post-excavation programme are not yet available, however, it is possible to offer a preliminary discussion of the results here (James and Yeoman forthcoming).

The Isle of May lies at the mouth of the Firth of Forth, 50 km north-east of Edinburgh. The island is just over 1.5 km in length, with high cliffs facing south to the Lothian side of the Forth. The excavations were focused on the likely site of the monastery as currently occupied by a ruined building standing to gable height, which contained architectural features dated to both the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. This building, which was aligned north-south, has long been named 'St Adrian's Chapel' on Ordnance Survey maps. This is in a sheltered location, tucked into the lee of a high western rock face, with an open aspect to the north and east (illus 4.1 and 4.2). The available land was naturally bounded to the south by outcropping bedrock, and to the east by a steep slope down to Kirkhaven. The site is within the only good pasture land, and is equidistant from the two main landings at Kirkhaven to the east, and Pilgrim's Haven to the west, each just 200m away.

### *Prehistoric Origins*

The excavations have revealed evidence of prehistoric occupation of the May, in the form of considerable quantities of stray artefacts, found at the monastery and elsewhere on the island. These finds comprise worked flints, a fragment of a polished stone axe, and sherds of Bronze Age and Iron Age pottery. The prehistoric farmers of east Fife clearly had the maritime skills and opportunities to exploit the seals, fish and seabirds, but we can only speculate as to the nature or permanence of any settlements here. There is also the possibility that the island had a religious significance for the ancient Fifers, and was used as a place of burial from time immemorial. It is entirely possible that the Christian religious communities were perpetuating a tradition of burial which began thousands of years before their arrival on the May.

### *Sepulchral Isle*

The main evidence from the excavations for the Pictish and early Christian use of the island was a large cemetery, 15m wide and over 40m in length, north

to south, the extent being dictated by the topography (James, 1992-96). This was, in part at least, bounded to the west by a substantial, kerbed roadway running from north to south. Only part of this large cemetery was excavated, and an even smaller sample of the total number of burials uncovered; in all about 45 near complete skeletons were excavated and lifted. The structure of the cemetery was essentially that of a long platform cairn, the basis of which was formed from a raised beach of fist-sized, water-worn cobbles. During the excavation two distinctive early burial rites were identified, the first being concentrated to the south and comprising two or more layers of burials within the man-made cairn. The cairn burials that were sampled provided a radiocarbon date-range spanning the seventh to twelfth centuries. Fragments of charred woollen cloth were found in association with one of these. Through time the cairn had been frequently restructured and enlarged, with a stone revetment constructed to define the east boundary, and to stop the cairn from sliding down the steep slope. The burials were covered in places by 1m of beach stones, the nearest source for which was at Pilgrim's Haven.

Within the northern part of the cairn was a well-defined long-cist cemetery, which contained two quite distinct groups of burials. The cists had been built into the surface and covered with lintel slabs (illus 4.3). The latter must have been visible, and regularly removed to allow the insertion of fresh burials. Most cists contained more than one burial, and in some cases four. Whether or not these were family graves is impossible to say. Of the 14 skeletons sampled from the northern group of cists, all were male, and half of these had lived to old age, probably older than 50. Four of these skeletons were radiocarbon-dated, producing dates which



Illus. 4.3

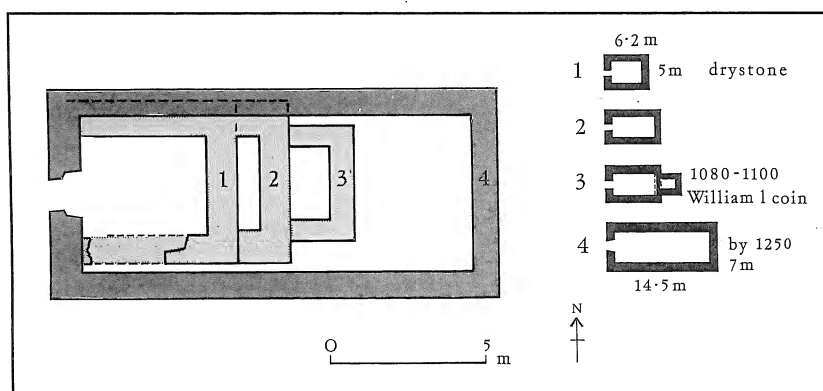
Excavating the long-cist cemetery

range from cal AD 434-610, to cal AD 647-682 (GU 4211-14, all expressed at the one sigma level of confidence). The southern group, of which 22 were sampled, was a mix of ages and gender, dominated by males. This group contrasted sharply with the other cists; pathological analysis has revealed this to be a group of profoundly sick people with chronic bone diseases and infections. One individual probably died from a sword cut to the head, while others died from poisoned wounds. Two of these skeletons were radiocarbon-dated, and provided a date range from the seventh to tenth centuries.

As yet there is no clear understanding of when the Christian faith was adopted *en masse* by the southern Picts, although a date during the later seventh century, at the latest, is generally assumed. Space does not allow a full rehearsal of this debate, or a detailed discussion of the dating of such burial forms. It is sufficient to say that long-cist cemeteries, concentrated in Fife and the Lothians, seem to have spanned the period from the third to ninth centuries (Etheridge 1993). The cairn and long-cist burials, quite distinct from the later burials, share a set of common characteristics:- they were all extended inhumations, chiefly of adult males. They were all orientated almost SW-NE, with the head at the SW, 60-70 degrees from magnetic north. The burials with the most extreme orientations were found in the long-cists furthest to the north, and in the cairn beneath the later monastery. There were no gravegoods, except quantities of white quartz pebbles, and deposits of shell sand. White quartz, which does not occur naturally on the island, is commonly found in prehistoric graves, and there may have been a belief in the Christian era that these pebbles were a token for entry into heaven (Fiona Baker pers. comm.). White quartz was also found in the graves of monks at Iona, uncovered during the restoration of the abbey church earlier this century.

Apart from the roadway, the only other excavated structure which may be contemporary with the earliest burials was a wall of a building with stone foundations, found beneath the west end of the later churches. This wall was on the same alignment as the early burials. Whether the early monastery was formally bounded by a *vallum* is uncertain; however, the site is located within a shelf of land which would naturally determine the shape of such an enclosure. This measures 170m from north to south, by about 40m in width, with the cemetery area located in the middle.

Three churches were found, all on a true E-W alignment, within and beneath the later church (thirteenth century) of the Benedictine Priory (illus 4.4). An assumption is made here that all the burials found close to the churches, and sharing the same alignment as the churches, post-date the cairn and long-cist burials, and are broadly contemporary with the long life of the churches. This area contained a number of disturbed slabs similar to those used to construct the long-cists. This might suggest that the long-cist cemetery originally spread further to the south, but was obliterated by later graves. The later burials were all found within a few metres to the north of the churches; many of these were



Illus. 4.4  
Simplified phase plan of the churches

in coffins (identified by coffin nails), in graves dug into the top of the cairn. They have provided a radiocarbon date-range from the tenth to thirteenth centuries. Two special grave markers were found close to the west door of the churches, each comprised of a stone block weighing around 2 tonnes. Only one of these was moved, with considerable effort by the excavators, and the redeposited cairn material beneath removed. A cist burial (unusually on a true E-W alignment) was found buried deep and directly below the marker, at a depth of about 600mm, the nature of the burial indicating that this was possibly someone of high rank. This contained a well preserved skeleton of an adult female (C14 date cal AD 1169-1263, GU-4969). These were roughly shaped, high slabs, without any trace of carving, but strongly reminiscent of hogback stones. Graves dug in the area just to the east of this were unusual in that the

ground all around them had been burnt to a high temperature, evident from the bright red colour of the soil. No simple explanation, such as the dumping of industrial residues, could be found, although the intense discolouration of the soil could have resulted from the conflagration of nearby timber buildings. A stray coin find from the cemetery is also of interest; this was a slightly worn silver penny of Burgred, the Saxon King of Mercia (852-874) (see discussion below).

The three early churches seem to share a constant west end, with each successive phase extending the structure to the east. The first church was of drystone construction, and roughly 6m square in plan. The only chronological evidence is a C14 date, possibly as early as the eighth century and no later than the middle of the tenth century, which came from a skeleton sealed by the construction of the first recorded stone church. This building was then extended by 1.6m to the east, forming a rectangular chapel with mortared foundations. This second building was further enlarged, to a length of 10m, in the late eleventh century by the addition of a small, square ended chancel, dated by a coin of William the Conqueror, of a type which was replaced in 1077 (Donal Bateson pers. comm.). Little detail of the structures survived, apart from the lower foundations. The first two buildings had earth floors, and one may have had a roof which incorporated the use of ceramic ridge tiles, a very coarse example of which was found. No burials were found within the early churches. The only dressed stonework to survive was the first course of ashlar at the south-east corner of the eleventh-century chancel.

These churches were built close to the south end of the burial cairn, the stones of which had been levelled to create a far from ideal building platform. This pattern of construction, continued on an even larger scale by the Benedictines, wreaked havoc on the cairn burials, and consequently thousands of stray fragments of human bone were found during the excavations.

So we can be reasonably certain that when the nine Benedictine monks from Reading Abbey colonised the May in around 1145 (Duncan 1957), there was a church already standing which was immediately adaptable to their liturgical needs. Indeed, the excavations have revealed that they built their convent around this church, and only replaced and enlarged it more than 50 years after their arrival (illus 4.5).



Illus. 4.5

Overall view of the church site from west to east

## Discussion

Writing this paper has provided the opportunity to combine a summary of and speculation on the life of St Ethernan with the preliminary results from the five years of excavations on the May, traditionally regarded as the place where he lived and died in the seventh century. It is proposed here that the saint and the individual whose obit is recorded in the Annals, are one and the same. If this is correct, then we have the remarkable evidence of a named, Iona-trained cleric, actively involved in missionary activity in eastern Scotland, coupled with the contemporary Christian funerary evidence from the island site closely associated with him. The radiocarbon dates, however, span such a broad period that we cannot rule out the possibility of there having been Christian religious settlement and burial activity on the May before the mid seventh century. In this, we are not helped by the likelihood of the long-cist burial rite being pre-Christian in origin. The full publication of the results of the detailed analysis of the enormous quantity of excavated data may, inevitably, change the views expressed here.

The great strategic importance of the location has always influenced how people have used the May. The island is the gateway to the Forth, the maritime route to and from some of the main centres of trade, prestige and population in Scotland. One of the busiest times that this route had ever seen was when monks from Iona, initially under the leadership of St Aidan, were invited by King Oswald of Northumbria (633-41) to bring the Christian faith to his kingdom. To travel freely in the Forth at this time, which was after all a disputed border zone between the Picts and the Angles, would have required special protection. The islands in the Forth would have made ideal staging posts on the route between Iona and Lindisfarne, as well as being ideal locations for early religious foundations. This would explain the great strength of the devotion to St Columba witnessed at Inchcolm Abbey in the later medieval period.

The data presented above, combining the documentary, hagiographical and place-name evidence, can be used to support a view that a holy man called Ethernan existed and was evangelising in eastern Scotland, although we can never be sure as to whether he died on the May in or around 669. We can be sure however, that his shrine was here, accompanied by the firm belief that the body of the saint was also here, sufficient to allow the cult to develop. The



archaeological evidence can now be used to underpin this, in that around this time a sizeable early Christian population, which probably included a religious community, was being buried in a large cemetery on the island. This may have been a purposeful adoption of an ancient ancestral burial isle with origins in the mythic past, firmly impressed upon by the superimposition of Christian buildings and burial rites. Local families may have continued to be buried here alongside the monks.

It is interesting to note that the ratio of males to females within the excavated sample of burials is 4:1, with a predominance of adult, and in some cases, very mature males. Such a population profile would be consistent with a sheltered monastic group. Another feature of some of these burials is worthy of speculation here:- the shell sand deposits in the long-cists, along with the purposeful burning of the ground around some of the later burials, can be interpreted as ritual purification in advance of, or during, interment. And this might explain how clothing or a shroud came to be charred, and thus preserved, in one of the cairn burials. Piety continued even in death; monks were sometimes laid on sack-cloth and ashes, the symbols of penance, before they died (Daniell, 1996, 7). The isolated group of chronically sick people buried in long-cists might represent pilgrimage or medical practice, or possibly a combination of the two.

The importance of the place seems to have developed and grown, to use the analogy of the development on the church site, commencing here with the construction of the almost square oratory probably in the ninth century. This in turn may have replaced one or more buildings, on the same SW-NE alignment of the oldest burials, possibly built in association with oratories, working and sleeping huts, and other domestic buildings. Some of these could have been of timber or sod construction, the fugitive remains of which may yet survive to be discovered in the future. A possible location for some of these would have been in the northern part of the putative monastic enclosure, which was developed as part of a naval base in the Second World War. After all, the paved road, which has all the appearance of a processional way, must have led from somewhere, to somewhere.

The archaeological discoveries are of great importance as this is the first site on the east coast to produce this kind of evidence. Space does not allow a more detailed comparison with parallel sites which are all in Wester Ross and the

Hebrides. The scale of the putative early monastic enclosure on the May, however does compare favourably with the major sites at Applecross, Kingarth and Lismore, although it is a fraction of the size of that at Iona (Foster, 1996, 82). Whilst on this subject, a small mention can be made of the investigations on Canna at St Columba's Chapel (A'Chill), a site with early Christian origins, where trial excavations have produced results with striking similarities to the situation on the May. On Canna the chapel seemed to have a long developmental history, and was built on top of a large burial cairn which may have origins in prehistory (Hunter, 1994).

The explanation as to how the Burgred penny came to be deposited in the cemetery is of interest. This coinage was probably circulating in Northumbria, only a relatively short distance from the May, on the south side of the Forth. It is entirely possible that at this time the island was within the Anglo-Saxon sphere, as it certainly had been in the middle of the seventh century, and that the coin was brought in via commerce or else as an offering at the shrine (D. Etheridge pers comm). An alternative explanation supports a Danish presence here in the later ninth century, and if true, provides further evidence of the continuing existence of an important monastic settlement on the May. Burgred was forced to flee overseas by the Viking army in 874, after which event the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle sub 875 tells us that 'Halfdan went with a part of the host into Northumbria and took winter quarters on the River Tyne, and the host overran that land, and made frequent raids against the Picts ...'. This may provide a firm historical basis to Wyntoun's allegation regarding a Viking raid on the May in 875, during which the Burgred coin could have been lost.

It is proposed here that the May was a prominent site in the consciousness of the early medieval population of south-east Scotland; bearing all this in mind, it seems likely that Margaret, Saint and Queen (1057-93) must have at least visited the shrine, if not provided the means to embellish it. A knowledge of this may even have influenced her youngest son when establishing the Benedictine house. The dating evidence shows that the site continued to develop during Margaret's lifetime, when it must already have been a well-established pilgrimage place. The heritage of sanctity, along with the presence of important relics and an existing church, all combined to recommend the site to David I as a location for a reformed monastery, when an incumbent clergy might have been supplanted by incoming Benedictines.

Pilgrimage to the May continued, and even grew, despite the apparent devastation of the site during the Wars of Independence. The fact that the pilgrims at some point came to believe that they were venerating the shrine of a ninth-century martyr, rather than a seventh-century father of the Church, is a small matter compared to the significance of this site in the history of pre-Reformation Christianity in Scotland, which is becoming better appreciated as a result of the recent excavations.

## Acknowledgments ~~~~~

I am most grateful to Dr Simon Taylor, Anderson Fellow in the Scottish Studies Institute, University of St Andrews, for pointing me in all sorts of useful directions when researching this paper. I am also indebted to him, and to Dr Barbara Crawford and Dr Richard Fawcett for reading the text and correcting my various historical failings. I have also benefited from the helpful advice and comments received from Prof A.A.M. Duncan, Dr Liz le Bon, and Dr Ross Trench-Jellicoe. There would be nothing to write were it not for the skills and dedication of the excavation team directed by Heather James of Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division. The project was led by the Fife Council, in partnership with Scottish Natural Heritage, who manage the island as a National Nature Reserve. The project also received generous support from:- Historic Scotland, the Russell Trust, the Hunter Archaeological Trust, and the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

**Planning Service Archaeology Unit,  
Fife Council, Glenrothes**

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## Carolingian Northumbria and the Legatine Mission of 786

J.E. Story

Within any study concerned with conversion and Christianity in early-medieval Europe, the influence of the papacy and of the city of Rome is ubiquitous. Even when attention is focused, as it is in this volume, on the northern world and upon the emerging polities of the North Sea zone, scholarly attention is invariably and inexorably drawn southwards, and to the processes by which the early-medieval papacy promulgated its Rome-centred vision of Christianity throughout the Germanic kingdoms newly established in the western provinces of the Roman Empire, and, as time drew on, to those regions which had previously lain outside the imperial hegemony.

Last year (1997) saw the fourteen-hundredth anniversary of one of the most familiar of these enterprises. I refer, of course, to the mission of Saint Augustine and his companions who arrived in Britain in 597 having been sent by Pope Gregory the Great to convert the pagan Anglo-Saxon peoples to the faith of Christ. That mission left two very important legacies; not only did it re-establish Christianity in southern Britain, but it also - and most fortunately for us - established the practice of literacy and the keeping of written records among the Anglo-Saxon peoples in Britain. The long-term ramifications for the whole of the North Sea world of Augustine's mission is hard to exaggerate, since, it was largely through the endeavours of Anglo-Saxon Christians, turned missionaries themselves, that the peoples of the North Sea littoral in Frisia, Saxony, Denmark, and in Scandinavia beyond were subsequently converted to Christianity (Levison 1946; Bartlett 1993; Abrams 1995). And, it was largely through their conversion to Christianity that these northern peoples were channelled into the cultural and political mainstream of western Christendom.

However, my focus today is not on the mission of 597 but on the next papal mission that was sent to Britain nearly two hundred years after Augustine's. The northern Anglo-Saxon chroniclers noted in their records for the year 786 the arrival of two distinguished papal emissaries, sent to Britain in that year on the orders of Pope Hadrian I. The chroniclers also recorded the purpose of this papal mission, stating that the legates had been sent to England, 'to renew the faith and the peace which St Gregory sent to us through bishop Augustine'.<sup>0</sup> Thus, the contemporary annalists, stressing continuity, made a direct

connection between the Legatine mission of 786 and the Augustinian mission of 597. The motives of the later mission, thus stated by the contemporary chroniclers, are explicit; the papal legates were sent to England to ensure that the faith which Augustine had established was still secure amongst the Anglo-Saxons, and by implication, to correct any error or misunderstanding that might have arisen in the two hundred years since the previous missionary expedition to Britain.

There are other significant connections between the two papal missions, connections which concern the Frankish involvement in both enterprises. Just as Gregory had sent Augustine's party through Gaul to the Frankish court of the Merovingian kings, Theuderic and Theudeberht, and the dowager queen Brunhild, so too Pope Hadrian sent his legates in 786 into Francia on the way to Britain. Routing the missions through Francia made obvious geographical sense, but it made political sense too; in the late 590s Augustine needed advice and information about the Kentish court that he would shortly encounter, knowledge which was much more easily available in Francia than in Rome in the late sixth century (Wallace-Hadrill 1971, 25; Wood 1994a and 1994b, 103). He also needed the practical assistance of Frankish translators in order to make his message clear to the nobility of the Kentish court (Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 72-3).

Similarly, pragmatic motives undoubtedly lay behind Hadrian's decision to send his emissaries into Francia in 786. It was presumably at Charlemagne's court that the legates acquired the Frankish helpers that are named in the sources; an abbot by the name of Wigbod as well as the Northumbrian scholar Alcuin, who had by 786 been resident at the Carolingian court for several years. The senior papal legate, Bishop George of Ostia, himself held the benefice of the Frankish see of Amiens, and may well have joined the mission only after it reached Francia (Duchesne 1915, 129; Levison 1946, 127). The close friendship and well-documented collaboration which existed between Charlemagne and Pope Hadrian makes it unthinkable that such a papal expedition could have travelled to Britain without the Frankish king's prior knowledge and approval. At the very least, the papal mission would have presented Charlemagne with an ideal opportunity to find out more about the increasingly tense political situation in Offa's Mercian kingdom, in Kent and in Northumbria (Brooks 1984, 111-23; Kirby 1991, 151-79).

It is worth pursuing the Frankish dimension of these missions further. Ian Wood has demonstrated the significance of the Merovingian court to Augustine's mission specifically and to Kentish royal power more generally. Æthelberht's marriage to Bertha, a Christian Frankish princess, has been seen by Wood and others as an essential precursor and as a catalyst to the Augustinian mission (Wood 1983, 12-17 and 1994a). In combination with other historical and archaeological evidence, Wood has argued that this evidence points to the probability of close Frankish cultural links with Kent, and towards the possibility of Frankish political hegemony over southern Britain at the end of the sixth century, as is indeed hinted in contemporary Byzantine sources (Wood 1992). The strong evidence for later sixth and seventh-century Merovingian links with Anglo-Saxon England and the newly-appreciated Frankish aspect of Augustine's mission, leads one to ask whether similar Frankish interest in the affairs of Anglo-Saxon England may have supported the papal mission in 786. If so, what sort of interest may the Carolingian kings have had in Anglo-Saxon England, and can we in any way identify a Carolingian 'hegemony' in the later eighth century which parallels that which has been postulated for Merovingian authority in Kent in the later sixth?

This suggestion is not as far-fetched as it might at first sound. And in putting these ideas forward, I turn gratefully to recent work done on the evolution of the early Scottish kingdom. A number of papers given at previous Dark-Age Conferences at St Andrews have argued the case for looking at the emergent *regnum Scottorum* from the perspective of the Carolingian kingdom, and have led the way in showing the value of studying parallels between the earliest, but sparsely recorded, decades of the Scottish kingdom with the analogous, but better documented, period of Frankish state evolution (Wormald 1996; Broun 1995; Airlie 1995). These papers have drawn attention to common themes such as the manifestation of political power, the manipulation of records of continuity, the targeted use of violence and the imposition of political ideologies (through the spread of legislative techniques, for example). Viewed from the continent and in the reflected light of the more detailed continental sources, the early kingdom of Scotland emerges from its 'Dark Age' gloom and fits comfortably into the mould of an early medieval, Carolingian-style polity.



## Frankish Links with the 'reges Scottorum' and Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms

There is evidence too of rather more direct links between the Carolingian court and the Scottish world. In a letter which Alcuin wrote from Francia in 796 to King Offa of Mercia, he referred to the arrival of messengers who had travelled from *Scottia* through Mercia, bringing with them news of the recent assassination of King Æthelred in Northumbria (Dümmler 1895, 147; Allott 1987, 53-5). Alcuin's letter describes Charlemagne's fury at the news which these messengers had brought and how he had demanded the return of gifts from the Avar treasure hoard that he had earlier sent to the Northumbrian king and bishops. Einhard, writing in the 820s, offers some further evidence to support Alcuin's off-the-cuff remarks about the power and significance of Charlemagne's gift-giving to distant kings as well as the presence of messengers from *Scottia* at the Frankish court. In his biography of Charlemagne, Einhard talks of the contacts between the *reges Scottorum* and the Frankish king, saying that, 'by the rich gifts which he gave them, Charlemagne had so influenced the *reges Scottorum* that they never addressed him as anything else but their lord, and called themselves his slaves and subjects' (Holder-Egger 1911, 19). Einhard refers also to letters from these kings in which their subservience was 'plainly shown'. Despite the evidently partisan context of their comments, both Alcuin and Einhard show that direct contact in the later eighth century between the courts of Charlemagne and the *reges Scottorum* were not uncommon. It is probable that the *Scotti* so named in these texts were resident in Ireland rather than northern Britain; contacts between Ireland and Francia were longstanding by the eighth century. However, a good case can be made for the extension of those continental contacts into what is now Scotland, most visibly perhaps through the stylistic affinities and the depiction of King David (Charlemagne's Old Testament hero) on the Pictish sarcophagus from St. Andrews (Henderson 1995, 85-8; Foster 1996, 111; Webster and Brown 1997, 227-9).

If a case can be made for Frankish influence and a Carolingian-style political and cultural hegemony stretching even to early medieval Scotland, what more can be said for kingdoms further south where the sources are that much richer and through which such influences may have passed? The formative influence of Francia on the early Northumbrian church is familiar to readers of Bede and other eighth-century writers, and has long been recognised by scholars of Northumbria's cultural 'renaissance' (Neuman de Vegvar 1987;

Webster and Backhouse 1991, 157-92). But what of the decades after Bede? The records of the Legatine Mission, I would argue, offer an excellent vehicle for studying the nature and the extent of Frankish involvement in the cultural, religious and political affairs of Anglo-Saxon England at a time which witnessed the often aggressive extension of Carolingian hegemony through much of western Europe. And so, it is the Frankish aspects of the legates' mission, and more specifically, the Frankish aspects of the Report concerning the mission which Pope Hadrian received from the legates, which will underpin the remainder of this paper, since it is this dimension which has been underplayed in previous analyses of the mission.<sup>1</sup> I would ask you to keep in mind here Wormald's definition of Carolingian 'hegemony' as the spread of Carolingian-style 'statecraft', and in particular, of his concept of the imposition of ideology through the practice of legislation (Wormald 1996, 134, 140).

According to the contemporary sources, the legates' mission of 786 was papal in its origin and religious in its motivation. As the chroniclers relate, the legates were sent to Britain on sound pastoral grounds. Pope Hadrian was fulfilling his duty to Christians in England, seeking to renew the faith planted by Augustine some two hundred years previously; 'if any tares had spoilt those crops, sown with the best seed .... we might be zealous with our highest endeavour to uproot completely anything harmful and to secure only the most wholesome fruit' (Dümmler 1895, 20). In pursuit of this goal the legates duly delivered messages and letters from Pope Hadrian concerning 'these vices' and 'those things that were necessary' to the leading men of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, to Jaenberht, the Archbishop of Canterbury, to Offa in Mercia, and to Cynewulf, king of the West Saxons. When the legates reached Northumbria, additional 'no less serious vices' were corrected in the presence of King Ælfwold and Archbishop Eanbald of York. But, despite the admirable pastoral goals of the mission, there was inevitably also a secular dimension to the legates' journey, a political aspect which has long been recognised by students of the Mercian supremacy (Brooks 1994, 111-27) and which can be best understood in relation to the Frankish involvement in the mission.

Offa's territorial and dynastic aspirations had placed him in direct conflict with the rulers of other southern Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, most notably with the secular and ecclesiastical rulers of Kent. His quarrel with the Archbishop of Canterbury culminated the year after the legates' mission with a synod at Chelsea which famously deprived Jaenberht of half his Southumbrian see by

creating a third archbishopric at Lichfield. Just as Henry VIII some 750 years later forced a dramatic reorganisation of the English church in order to realise his dynastic ambitions, so too, King Offa had to create a compliant archbishop in order to have his son consecrated and thus ensure his right to succeed enshrined and protected by ecclesiastical privilege. Note here that both of these events, the creation of a new archbishopric and the consecration of the eldest son of a monarch, are absolutely Carolingian in style and in intent (Kirby 1991, 169). The presence of Franco-Papal legates in Canterbury and in Mercia the year before the portentous Synod of Chelsea cannot have been a coincidence; the one must have cleared the way for the other, and indeed, the statement in the Report to Hadrian concerning the significance of royal anointing makes a link between the legates' mission and events the following year all but conclusive.

Cubitt has recently emphasised the importance of the Northumbrian dimension of the legates' mission, reminding us that it is the proceedings of the northern council which receive the most detailed attention in the Report sent to Pope Hadrian (Cubitt 1995, 153-90).<sup>2</sup> It is significant too, that it was the Northumbrian council which was attended by Charlemagne's personal envoy, Abbot Wigbod, and by Alcuin as well. Cubitt has forcefully argued that Alcuin was one of the driving forces behind both the mission and the composition of the Report received by Hadrian. Although he is not especially prominent in the Report, Cubitt identifies Alcuin's involvement in both the content and the composition of the decrees of the northern council. Specific issues raised at the northern council mirror concerns which Alcuin himself raised in his letters to Northumbrian kings written a little later in the 790s. Stylistically too, the legates' decrees are reminiscent of Alcuin's political and philosophical writings on the nature of temporal power and the early Carolingian *via regia* (Cubitt 1995, 161-90; Story forthcoming). But to concentrate on the well-known writings and personality of Alcuin is to minimise, and perhaps eclipse, the role of the leader of the mission and author of the Report, Bishop George himself.<sup>3</sup> Although we know much less about him, what we can establish about the career of Bishop George of Ostia and Amiens shows him to have been a major force in Franco-papal diplomatic circles in the second half of the eighth century. His long experience and his presence at the Northumbrian council makes it at least as likely that his was the guiding influence over the mission, over the Report to Hadrian and over Alcuin himself.<sup>4</sup> It was through George that the 'Frankishness' of the legates' mission was most clearly articulated.

## Bishop George of Ostia and Amiens.

By 786 Bishop George was one of the most venerable churchmen in western Europe. He first appears in the sources as bishop of Ostia in 753 and is last attested at the consecration of the church at St. Riquier and also at a Roman synod some forty-five years later in 798. By the time of his journey to Britain he would have been in his late sixties at least and already a very experienced diplomat (Duchesne 1915, 128-9; Levison 1946, 127-8). It is particularly significant for our purposes that Frankish and Papal sources mention George's presence at some of the key events which shaped Carolingian power in Europe in the later eighth century. He was part of the papal entourage which accompanied Pope Stephen II to Francia in 753-4, to beg Pippin III to protect Rome from the aggression of the Lombards. He was present therefore, at the ceremony at St. Denis when Pope Stephen anointed and crowned Pippin, his wife and his two sons Karloman and Charlemagne, the event which was seen by contemporaries to legitimise the Carolingian coup over the Merovingian dynasty. Subsequently, he was employed several times by Pope Stephen and Pope Paul I as a high-status messenger to Francia, and his presence was recorded at Frankish councils such as that held at Compiègne in 757. From the beginning of Charlemagne's reign he seems to have spent more time in Francia at his bishopric in Amiens, which had been granted to him by Pippin several years previously. But his keen knowledge of Italian political problems made him Charlemagne's choice as a royal *missus* to the Pope as part of his campaign to conquer and subdue Lombard Italy in the 770s and early 780s. The latter part of his career saw him active in northern Francia and mixing in the same court circles as Alcuin. His wide diplomatic experience as well as his possession of the see at Amiens which was conveniently sited near the Channel coast made George an ideal candidate for the mission to Britain in 786. His career can thus be seen to have belonged as much to Carolingian Francia as it did to Papal Italy, and consequently, we should not be surprised to find that the immediate affinities of the Northumbrian council and of the document produced there under his name lie with Frankish legislative documents and assemblies.

There are three aspects of the Northumbrian council which show these Frankish affinities particularly clearly, namely, the form of the council, and the form and content of the document produced there.

## Frankish affinities in the Form of the Northumbrian Council

One of the most striking aspects of the Legatine mission to Britain as it was reported to Hadrian, is the parallel between the Northumbrian council and a Carolingian assembly. The comparison is true both of the format of the council, and of the document produced there. Four features stand out from George's narrative:

1. The meeting was summoned by the king and was held in the presence of the gathered secular and ecclesiastical elite of the kingdom
2. A document, called a 'capitulary' (*capitularia*), was produced with the decisions of the council summarised in numbered paragraphs (and reproduced in George's Report to Hadrian)
3. This document was concerned with a combination of ecclesiastical and secular issues, of practical procedures and of moral reforms
4. The document was proclaimed verbally to the gathered assembly thereby giving it a degree of legal authority.

The description thus given can be compared, for example, with the introduction to Charlemagne's capitulary of March 779, which was promulgated at the palace of Herstal.

In the eleventh year of the reign of our lord and most glorious king Charles, in the month of March, there being gathered together in one synod and council, the bishops and abbots and illustrious counts, together with our most pious lord, there was made a capitulary in which decisions were agreed concerning appropriate matters in accordance with God's will. (King 1987, 203-5; Boretius 1883, no. 20)

Like the legates' Report, the Herstal capitulary was dated by Charlemagne's regnal years and was presented to an assembled group of important laymen and their ecclesiastical counterparts, who willingly affirmed the decrees proposed. Furthermore, the Herstal capitulary continues with twenty-three short *capitula*, the first few concerning ecclesiastical matters and the rest detailing issues of secular concern. This is exactly the recipe of the document produced at the Northumbrian council where the first ten *capitula* relate to ecclesiastical issues

and the next ten to secular problems. Thus at both Herstal in 779 and in Northumbria in 786 a document called a 'capitulary' was promulgated at a council where the secular and ecclesiastical elite of the kingdom had gathered.

## Frankish affinities in the form of the Legates' Report

The key observation here is George's use of the word 'capitulary' to describe the document produced at the Northumbrian council. The terminology is significant, since this is the first occasion that this word, in the technical sense of a treatise concerning secular as well as ecclesiastical issues arranged in short headings, is found in an Anglo-Saxon context. The word is significant because the capitulary is synonymous with Carolingian legislation and the imposition of Carolingian royal authority. As such, the capitulary is not an indigenous Anglo-Saxon form of document. This basic observation indicates the inspiration of a non-Anglo-Saxon mind at work behind the composition of the document which is dovetailed into George's Report. The particular use of the word 'capitulary' in the legates' Report is, in fact, one of the earliest uses of the word outside a papal context. It is used in a variety of contexts in the eighth century, but it is not until the reign of Charlemagne that the term is used contemporaneously in the preamble of a document (as opposed to being employed anachronistically by later editors), and it is only after 789 that the label becomes a commonplace of Frankish legislation. The earliest secure example seems to be the capitulary promulgated at the assembly at Herstal in 779, already discussed. Apart from this one example, the only other true capitularies which predate the legates' capitulary come from the territories of Frankish Lombardy which had been conquered by Charlemagne in 774. There are three, possibly four, such documents issued either by Charlemagne or in the name of his son, Pippin, which can probably be dated before 786 (Ganshof 1958, 16-18, 114). The capitulary of Mantua (although its date is debated) is a particularly pertinent parallel to those promulgated in Northumbria and Herstal. Like them it contains a mixture of ecclesiastical and secular issues of moral, military and fiscal reform.<sup>5</sup>

This very brief survey suggests that the document produced by the papal legates in England stands near the beginning of a long and important Carolingian tradition of legislative techniques, a tradition which appears, at least in part, to have significant roots in papal and Lombard diplomatic practice (Wickham 1981, 44). I venture to speculate that one of the links in this process of the

development of Carolingian capitulary legislation was our own Bishop George. The evidence is admittedly circumstantial but the fact remains that Lombard issues were in the early 780s the special diplomatic concern of the man who was sent to England in 786. In his capacity as a Franco-papal *missus* with a special interest in Lombard issues George is likely to have come into contact with the early capitularies which promulgated Carolingian authority in northern Italy. The form of both the document produced by the legates and the council at which it was presented is consistent with emerging Carolingian methods of legislation. Although nominally papal in origin, the legates' capitulary is undoubtedly Carolingian in typology.

This 'Frankishness' extends also to aspects of the content of the document. As already noted the legates' capitulary proposed the reform of a combination of secular and ecclesiastical issues, a pattern closer to Carolingian rather than Anglo-Saxon tradition. The author of the Report says explicitly that the capitulary was prompted by a revelation, 'related in our hearing, that there were other, no less serious vices in need of correction' at the Northumbrian court. In many ways, the contents of the capitulary can be shown to relate to the specific problems experienced in Northumbria in the later eighth century, in particular the peculiar propensity of the Northumbrian aristocracy to assassinate their kings or to force them into exile. But in important respects the response of the legates to these problems can be shown to have been Carolingian. Most significant in this regard, is the advice of the legates concerning the honour due to kings because of their anointed status; 'let no-one dare to kill a king because he is the Lord's anointed'. The impact of such statements on Anglo-Saxon political thought and action was profound, as the consecration of Offa's son Ecgrifhth the following year vividly shows. Carolingian kingmaking rituals were witnessed in Northumbria too, in the ceremony which elevated Eardwulf to royal status in 796, ten years after the legates' mission. The Carolingian context of the legates' references to royal anointing is uncontroversial, but it is particularly appropriate to the circumstances of George's career. His presence at the anointing and coronation of King Pippin and his family in 753-4 must have made a lasting impression on George of the potential power and effectiveness of holy unction.<sup>6</sup>

Other aspects of the legatine capitulary display continental influence too. The suggestion that monks, nuns, and canons conduct themselves with suitable sobriety in the manner of Eastern monks and canons, shows knowledge of

Byzantine customs. This reference to canons and their lifestyle as being distinct from that of regular monks is also the earliest of its kind in any Anglo-Saxon source, and again is suggestive of external influence (Wormald 1991, 34). Another feature which reflects Frankish concerns is the request for the proper payment of tithe and the use of fair weights and measures. Financial issues are a common concern of Frankish legislation but are rarely found in an Anglo-Saxon source prior to this date (Grierson 1954, 66). The legatine capitulary was the first official English document to demand the proper payment of tithe, and, as Levison noted, this 'may have been a reflection of the continental situation' (1946, 113-4). Certainly tithe was employed by Charlemagne (much to Alcuin's consternation) as a method of ensuring control over the newly conquered tribes of the Saxons and Avars. The payment of tithe was demanded in the Capitulary of Herstal in 779, and the use of fair weights and measures was a concern of Pippin at the Council of Soissons in 744 and again in the 750s. Another recurring theme of the legatine capitulary which is also commonly found in Frankish capitulary legislation are the references to canonical marriage. An important parallel is the proceedings of the council at Compiègne which met in 757, much of which concerns the complexities of canonical marriage. Given the number of references in the Legatine Capitulary to this subject, it is significant to note that George of Ostia is known to have been present also at the Council of Compiègne some thirty years prior to his mission to Northumbria. His consent is explicitly recorded against three of the decrees promulgated there (Boretius 1883, no. 15). Furthermore, as Cubitt has emphasised, there are close parallels between the content of the legates' capitulary and the *Admonitio Generalis*, the seminal Carolingian reform capitulary, which was promulgated at Aachen only three years later in 789, parallels which she has attributed to Alcuin's presence at both the Northumbrian and Frankish courts in those years (Cubitt 1995, 160-5; Wormald 1991, 42-3). In the light of all this evidence, the Northumbrian council can be seen to have been a very important stepping stone in the evolution of Carolingian legislative practice both in form and content. It is also a clear example of the extension of the techniques of Carolingian 'statecraft' beyond the borders of Charlemagne's Frankish kingdom.

#### AD 786 in Francia.

The dating clause at the beginning of George's Report shows that the Northumbrian council and the second Mercian meeting were held sometime during the last three months of 786. This is important in relation to Charlemagne's



actions in that year. 786 was an unusual year for Charlemagne. The Royal Frankish Annals describe how he sent his army into Brittany, defeating the opposition raised by the Breton leaders 'with great speed' (Kurze 1895, 72-3). The campaign being concluded so swiftly, Charlemagne found that 'he had peace throughout his realms', and, after the defeated Breton leaders were presented to him at an assembly, he decided to go to Rome to give thanks 'at the threshold of the blessed apostles' and to sort out the rumbling affairs in Italy. Charlemagne set out for Rome in early autumn and reached Florence in time to celebrate Christmas. He reached Rome at the start of the next year and was 'received with great honours by the Lord Pope Hadrian'. Charlemagne remained in Italy long enough to celebrate Easter with the Pope. Thus, in the same year that Pope Hadrian sent his messenger from Rome to find George in Francia, Charlemagne himself travelled to Rome. The chronology of the Annals and the dating clause of the Report suggests that the Roman missionaries would have arrived in Francia before Charlemagne departed south, and it is possible that it was they who prompted his decision to go to Italy. The chronology also allows for the possibility that the letter which George wrote to Hadrian after the successful completion of the mission reached Rome while Charlemagne was still in Italy. Given their mutual input into the mission to England, the outcome as described by George could well have been one of the items discussed by Charlemagne and Hadrian in the 'several days' that they spent together early in 787. If, as seems likely, George and his companions had known before they set off for Britain that Charlemagne intended to travel to Italy that same winter, it is possible that the entire Report to Hadrian could have been written with the foreknowledge that the Frankish king might be in Italy when George's letter on the mission arrived. This would account for the formulaic reference to Charlemagne in the address, being exactly that which the papal chancery would have used when writing to the Frankish king at this date.

The papal mission to the Anglo-Saxons in 786 can, in the light of all this evidence, be cast securely within Frankish parameters. The Carolingian constituency in the personnel sent to England and in the events which occurred there is considerable. The long term impact of the legates' mission in 786 was not as profound as that of St. Augustine, but the attempt by the legates to reform Northumbrian and Mercian society along the lines of Carolingian social *mores* and political tradition can be interpreted as a clear example of the extension of Carolingian cultural hegemony in the later eighth century. As such, any future study of the legates' missions to Anglo-Saxon England must give due

consideration to this Carolingian context as well as the more obvious Anglo-Saxon and papal dimension with which we are so familiar.

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## Notes

- <sup>0</sup> The mission is recorded in the northern recension of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (s.a. 785) and the *Historia Regum* (s.a. 786) using terms sufficiently close to suppose a direct relationship between the text of the two chronicles at this point (Cubbin 1996, 16; Arnold 1885, 51). The ASC version D annal (which is slightly fuller than that for the other versions of the northern recension) reads like a translation into OE from the Latin parent text of the *Historia Regum*. The best edition of the text of the Report written by one of the legates, George of Ostia, is given in Dümmler (1895, 20-9), a partial translation is in Whitelock (1972, 770-5).
- <sup>1</sup> The exception here is the paper by Wormald where he notes that, 'if this document had appeared with a prologue in the name of *Karolus rex Francorum*, it would not seem at all out of place in a Carolingian capitulary series' (1991, 43). Significant too are the comments made by Levison (1946, 127-9)
- <sup>2</sup> It is notable that all the surviving records of the mission, George's Report and the chronicle records, are Northumbrian in origin.
- <sup>3</sup> George is not named as the author in the Report itself, but is named in the rubric to the sole surviving manuscript copy of the Report (Wolfenbüttel, MS 454), in the *Historia Regum* annal for 786, and in a letter from Pope Leo III written some twelve years after the mission to Coenwulf of Mercia (Dümmler 1895, 187-9).
- <sup>4</sup> In a letter which Alcuin wrote to Adalhard, abbot of Corbie in 790 he refers to George as 'my father' and himself as George's 'spiritual son' (Dümmler, 1895, 34-5), terms which are closely reminiscent of Alcuin's evident respect and affection for Ælberht, the archbishop of York under whom Alcuin spent his most formative years.

- <sup>5</sup> The date of the Mantuan Capitulary is debated. It was dated c. 781 by Boretius - confirmed by Ganshof (1958, 19-20, n. 63) and Grierson (1954, 66-72) but is thought by others to be early ninth century in date (Wormald 1991, 34 n. 20).
- <sup>6</sup> This impression will have been reinforced by the anointing in Rome in 781 of Charlemagne's sons. George was sent to Rome at Charlemagne's behest in 782 when memories of this event would have been fresh.

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## History and Archaeology: the Conversion of Scandinavia

Lesley Abrams

The latest scholar to survey the conversion of Europe pronounced the conversion of Scandinavia to have been gradual, piecemeal, muddled, and undisciplined (Fletcher 1997, 416). He complained that, 'apart from royal push and shove, there is precious little evidence for missionary activity in the positive sense'. This unfortunate condition of near-sourcelessness applies to Viking-Age Scandinavia as a whole; in many ways, it is almost a prehistoric society. Fletcher also raised the interesting and 'unsettling' question of the extent to which our view of Scandinavian conversion is actually due to the absence of historical sources of the kind available elsewhere for the study of other conversions. This question deserves further consideration. Is it indeed because we have no Scandinavian Bede or Scandinavian Boniface - the former to shape the picture for us according to some artful and tidy scheme, the latter to preserve some of the ideological and practical concerns of those in the field - that we see no system and no shape in the evangelising of this last area of northwest Europe to be brought into Christendom? It is generally supposed that the transformation of pagan chieftaincies into Christian kingdoms was not properly achieved in Scandinavia until the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Is the state of the sources the real reason that Scandinavian conversion appears unsystematic, unenthusiastic, and painfully slow? It must be admitted that in the absence of further evidence the process of conversion will remain obscure, but we can at least consider how the condition of the written sources has affected our view. Also worth scrutiny is the more abundant but necessarily speculative contribution of archaeology.

### Initial Stages

To set the scene, I shall begin with a brief sketch of the way in which Christianity seems to have reached the Scandinavian homelands, based on the testimony of the very fragmentary written sources.<sup>1</sup> It seems that the first to attract the attention of missionaries was Denmark, not coincidentally closest to the Frankish Empire and neighbour to the Saxons, whose brutal treatment by Charlemagne in the 770s and 780s made explicit the pairing of conquest and conversion. The first recorded mission to the Danes, however, occurred before the forced conversion of their southern neighbours, in the context of the exodus

of missionaries from England to the Continent in the late seventh and early eighth century; the Anglo-Saxon missionary Willibrord returned from the land of the Danes with tales of heathen savagery and a poor prognosis for improvement (Talbot 1954, 9-11). It was some time before Denmark was targeted again, in the third decade of the ninth century, first from Reims and then through official Frankish missionary delegations under imperial sponsorship, led by the monk, later bishop, and still later saint, Anskar (Wood 1987). In 826 the Frankish emperor Louis the Pious selected Harald Klak, one of the kings vying for power in Denmark, had him brought to the imperial court, baptised, and sent home to begin the process of bringing his people into the imperial, Christian, fold. But the Danes were not ready: they ejected Harold, and although his successors as king allowed Anskar to preach, they - and their counterparts in Sweden, where Anskar also led missions - did not succumb to the Christian message. Anskar's institutional base, the see of Hamburg-Bremen, considered itself, with the support of the papacy, to have a mandate for the evangelisation of the non-Christian northern peoples from the time of its establishment in the ninth century; but when the official conversion of the Danish royal house took place in the 960s, it was apparently as a result of the activities of a freelance German missionary called Poppo (P. Sawyer 1987, 69-70). Hamburg-Bremen's churchmen were nonetheless active in all the Scandinavian lands in the tenth and eleventh centuries, although competition existed in the form of Anglo-Saxon clergy, imported to Norway by Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf Haraldsson, Norwegian kings of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. The official conversions led by Olaf Tryggvason and by the Swedish king Olof Skötkonung are dated from 995 and credited to these largely unknown English churchmen. Christianisation of institutions and social custom followed the conversion of the kings, but only gradually. There is no evidence for territorial dioceses until (probably) the mid eleventh century in Denmark, the later eleventh century in Norway, and the twelfth century in Sweden. Formal re-organisation, including the creation of national Churches, each headed by an archbishop, was prompted by the visit in the 1150s of the papal legate Nicholas Breakspear, soon thereafter to become the first English pope (Sawyer *et al.* 1987; Abrams 1995a).

This, at least, is one possible reconstruction sketch of the process, and it focuses almost exclusively on the royal level. It is a picture based essentially on the testimony of outsiders - non-Scandinavians - or of much later writers, although the enthusiasm of Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf Haraldsson for the new religion found reflection in their court poetry (Edwards 1982-3). Worse still,

with a few such exceptions, those sources which are contemporary and most reliable relate principally to early missions which failed to succeed. The really active years of the tenth and eleventh centuries are almost invisible in reputable, contemporary, sources, although they form the backdrop of a rich fictional literature - sagas and hagiography - of the later middle ages. Nor is it just a mission-history such as Bede provided for Anglo-Saxon England which is missing; Scandinavia lacks other written evidence of the sort which supplements Bede's great narrative of English conversion - such as the laws of the first Christian kings of Kent, or royal diplomas, or saints' lives (Abrams 1996). The earliest extant Scandinavian laws began to be recorded in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; native charters and hagiography are similarly late. Furthermore, although we know from occasional references surviving in English monastic records that Anglo-Saxon churchmen did service in Scandinavia and returned to retirement in England (Abrams 1995b), no letters asking for books, no *vitae* of colleagues, and no personal reminiscences have been preserved or (as yet) identified.

### Written Evidence

We do, nevertheless, have other sorts of written material and, carefully used, it can throw light in an indirect way on a number of matters. For example, in attempting to determine the extent and nature of the English contribution to Scandinavia's Christianisation, I have looked at hagiography, liturgy, palaeography, skaldic poetry, sagas, and runic inscriptions, among other things (Abrams 1995b). I have discussed elsewhere the identification in Scandinavia of manuscripts written in England, or bearing evidence of Anglo-Saxon influence (Abrams 1995a, 26-7). Valuable clues regarding the export of saints' cults and liturgical models can be added to our picture of Anglo-Saxon missionising, but much of the evidence is fragmentary - literally - and has been retrieved only through painstaking work by palaeographers and librarians. The activity of Anglo-Saxon churchmen can be dimly reflected in other media as well: for example, a runestone at Kuli in Norway mentioning the arrival of Christianity in the region twelve years before the raising of the stone shows the influence of the English language in its terminology (the word *kristindómr* being borrowed from Old English *cristendom*) (Hagland 1991). The context of the stone is obscure, however: to what does the 'arrival' of *kristindómr* refer? Missionaries? The independent decision of a local assembly? A royal edict, delivered to a local assembly, perhaps during a royal visit? And when?



Suggestions range from the 960s to the 1030s.<sup>2</sup> The Kuli stone is not unique in raising difficult questions: none of the evidence employed in the detection of Anglo-Saxon evangelising activity in Scandinavia is straightforward or simple to use. If we were to believe the thirteenth-century stories of St Sigfrid the Englishman, for example, he was responsible - especially in Sweden - for all significant missionary achievements for approximately one hundred years, and everyone else in the mission-field was his nephew (B. Sawyer 1987, 101-5; Schmid 1934). Clearly this was not true: but the later medieval Swedish Church (which still counted Englishmen among its upper ranks) was determined to link its origins with Englishness, of which Sigfrid became the symbol. Our problem is nicely defined if we compare these native Scandinavian, but retrospective, sources, with an almost contemporary but outside view, that of Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen), compiled in the 1070s (Schmeidler 1917; Tschan 1959). This account describes the activity of missionary bishops, mainly in the eleventh century, mainly in Sweden. Sigfrid barely gets a look-in. In fact, English clerics are almost absent from Adam's narrative, except the scandalous bishop Osmund, whose aspirations to be recognised as archbishop of Sweden were quashed by the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, possibly with cash (Schmeidler 1917, 155-9 and 224; Tschan 1959, 125-7 and 183). Adam was not interested in painting a detailed and accurate picture of the scene for posterity; his work was in defence of his archbishop, Adalbert, at a crisis in that ambitious churchman's career. What really mattered to Adam was Adalbert and the traditions, authority, and future powers of the see. That we would like to rely on him for a more than one-dimensional view of the Scandinavian mission-field reflects our goals, not his.

If the English have a low profile in Adam's History, representatives of other Churches are all but invisible. We can infer nevertheless from other evidence, not to mention from sheer probability, that they were there. The extent of eastern activity in the Christianisation of Scandinavia has been the subject of disagreement in the past (Fuglesang 1997; Beskow 1994 and 1996), but current research is rehabilitating the suggestion of influence (Hagland 1996; Staecker 1997b). We should not be downcast by the fact that English and eastern, not to mention Slav or even Norman churchmen impinge barely or not at all on Adam's Hamburg-Bremen-centred view, and that his version of eleventh-century missionary enterprise differs significantly from the version offered by the later medieval Swedish or Danish Churches. Perhaps this disagreement,

though confusing, is not *merely* confusing: it could also be significant, offering us useful evidence about the dynamic of the time and place, indicating that the Scandinavian mission-field was a free-for-all, conducted without the overseeing eye and controlling hand of a centralising authority. The papacy, which had played this role at other times and in other places, seems to have been unwilling, unable, or not sufficiently interested to commit the necessary resources to the enterprise at this time, after the initial effort to establish Anskar's see.<sup>3</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that although - as in all medieval contexts - the paucity of directly relevant contemporary source material doubtless derives in part from losses, it may be that the lack of native testimony is to some extent significant rather than accidental (Abrams 1995a, 33-40). In Scandinavia, monastic and cathedral communities made a late appearance on the scene, in contrast to Anglo-Saxon England or Francia, where monastic house and mission-centre were often one and the same. The lack of effective papal involvement (until late in the day)<sup>4</sup> and the relative weakness of kingship as an institution are but two of the factors which retarded the development of religious communities. We can only speculate about the side-effects of these special circumstances. But if the four bishops who are said by Adam to have accompanied King Olaf Haraldsson to Norway from England (Schmeidler 1917, 117-18; Tschan 1959, 94) had founded monasteries, and if those monasteries - like those of their predecessors in eighth-century Francia - had been provided with papal back-up as well as generous royal support, I suspect that we would know a very great deal more about the origins and nature of early Christianity in Norway. Religious houses were elsewhere the guardians of memory. I would argue that the sparseness of the written record, even if exaggerated by losses, reflects the nature of the Church in early Scandinavia, unable, until quite a late date, to support the expensive, high-maintenance, communities where a Bede or a Boniface could write and be copied. Again, the condition of the evidence, that is to say, its scarcity, is itself amenable to interpretation.

This may sound like grasping at straws. I shall therefore abandon the written record and turn to archaeology. Its evidence has been of central importance in addressing the question of the way in which the pagan Scandinavian homelands became Christian kingdoms. Of what does this evidence consist? What issues does it raise, and what questions can it answer?

## Origins of Christianity: Archaeological Evidence

The first question to pose is that of origins and date. The absence of narrative histories and other documentation has opened the door to speculation about Scandinavia's initial exposure to Christianity. Some archaeologists, for example, have argued for very early influence, even from the late Roman period (Furingsten 1995), through unofficial and informal means, such as contact with Christian slaves, or contact with merchants who had traded with Christian countries, or, later, contact with Vikings who had plundered Christian countries. There are serious matters to consider here, especially with respect to the peripatetic Scandinavians of the Viking Age. When Viking armies accepted baptism as part of a political arrangement, if any of their members did in reality convert, what happened when they returned to a homeland without priests and parishes? If merchants abroad were attracted by the Christian message and were baptised, how did they maintain their faith (both belief and practice) on their return to Scandinavia? While there is at other times and in other parts of the world evidence for religious influence from below, in my view any Christianity which happened to reach early Scandinavia by these means would have had little chance of flourishing or propagating itself without the formal structure of an institutional Church. It seems to me that such a structure would have been required not just in order to minister to converts but - more importantly - to train teachers and priests who could ensure the continuation of the faith beyond the lifetime of those exposed or influenced abroad or by others who had been abroad. This difficulty may lie behind the suggestions of religious insincerity of which Viking-Age Scandinavians have often been accused. When Anskar visited Birka in the mid ninth century, it became clear that some of the chief men of the pagan Swedes had adopted Christianity while in Dorstadt on business, resuming their non-Christian practices on their return home (Waitz 1884, 58; Robinson 1921, 93). Anskar's *vita* is similarly early evidence of the accommodation elsewhere called 'prime-signing', where those intending to convert were signed with the cross but deferred their baptism (Waitz 1884, 53; Robinson 1921, 84-5).<sup>5</sup> This may have allowed them to follow two regimes, in the absence of anyone to insist on one or the other (or in the event of return to a pagan environment). As I have said, there are no written sources which refer to a significant Christian arrival in the days before the first recorded missions from Francia in the early ninth century, and missionary successes were in any case apparently very limited before the end of the tenth century. Earlier missions have nonetheless been

postulated on the basis of physical remains (Holmqvist 1975; Solli 1995; Staecker 1997a).<sup>6</sup>

The archaeological evidence cited to support the existence of otherwise undocumented Christian missions and their influence before the later tenth century includes changes in burial practice in some parts of Scandinavia (particularly a shift to east-west orientation and the abandonment of grave-goods), artistic parallels (with Britain or the East), and the appearance of Christian metalwork from the British Isles in Scandinavian graves. This evidence does not necessarily, in my view, testify to a Christian population. Furthermore, we must distinguish between individual converts who made a personal transition from paganism to Christianity, such as Anskar's successes, and a society which has done the same (or at least begun to). The presence of Christians at Birka, for example, is not contested, but their significance may be: while they attest to personal conversion and the activity of missionary churchmen, they do not prove that widespread and enduring change took place as a result - that a Christian society had been created in ninth-century Sweden. In fact, excavations of a contemporary cemetery at Valsta, like Birka in the Mälars Valley, show that while the community there possessed artefacts proclaiming its contacts with the international, Christian, network of trade or exchange, there is nevertheless no sign of Christian influence in the burial ritual, as cremations (most unlikely to be Christian) continued throughout the ninth century, the period of missionary activity also: inhumations did not appear until after a reorganisation of the cemetery in the second half of the tenth century (G. Andersson 1997).

## Burials: Pagan and Christian

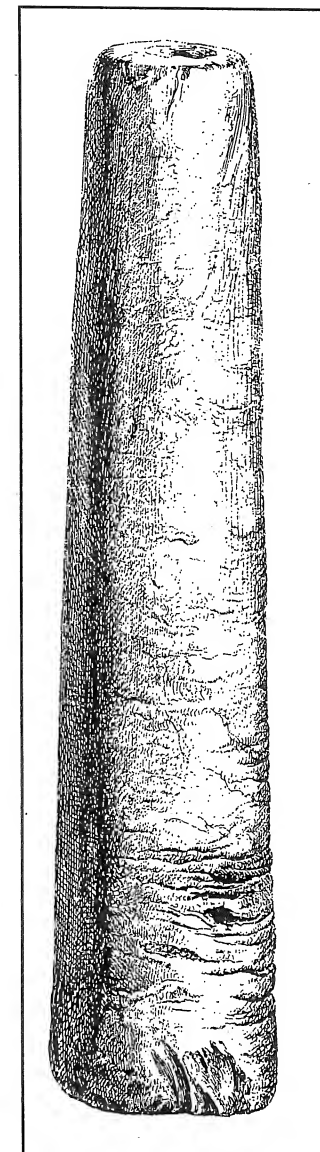
These difficulties demonstrate that, with archaeology as with written sources, in addition to the obvious problem created by the disappearance of material remains, there is the question of interpretation. How is religious change detectable in physical form? What aspects of Christianity leave useful material traces? Can they be dated? What do they mean? A whole host of questions attaches itself to the physical evidence. Students of conversion lean heavily on the evidence of burials, for example. But what do graves tell us? It is worth reminding ourselves that burial is an ideological performance, and that what we are left with is the set - not, unfortunately, the script. How the physical remains reflect the belief of those who conducted the burial and the rites which

accompanied it are matters for interpretation. In the past it has frequently been assumed that a change from accompanied to unaccompanied burial - the abandonment of grave-goods - signals the arrival of Christianity. But this is clearly not always a valid assumption. For one thing, people who stop burying grave-goods with the dead do not necessarily do so because they have become Christian. There are other reasons, such as a new attitude among the elite to the conspicuous consumption of wealth, perhaps created by a decrease in competition for status (Hedeager 1992, 27-82). Alternatively, it could indicate a switch to another manner of demonstrating status, such as ritual sacrifice rather than deposition of wealth (Hines 1994, 11). Even in cases where Christian influence might be cited in the abandonment of accompanied burial - i.e., a decision to change customary and traditional rites in order to imitate those of a Christian culture that was admired or aspired to - this does not indicate that those who changed had any knowledge of or association with the ideology that determined the form of burial. Further, although Christians did not routinely continue to place objects in graves in the manner of many earlier Germanic pagans, burials such as that of the seventh-century Anglo-Saxon bishop-saint, Cuthberht (Battiscombe 1956), complete with jewellery, clothes, and the tools of his trade, including reading matter, are not unique. There are similar examples from Francia (James 1992). In fact, the equation of grave-goods with paganism has been so discredited that Richard Fletcher has recently described a probably sixth-century burial at Morken, near Aachen, which was placed 'in a wooden chamber with weapons and whetstone and shield, with jewellery and coin, with vessels of glass and bronze, bit and bridle, and bucket, hefty joints of pork and beef' as offering 'no conclusive evidence either way' of its subject's religious affiliation (Fletcher 1997, 132). Fletcher similarly sees 'religious neutrality' in Mound One at Sutton Hoo (*ibid.*, 126).

Individual cases aside, the presence or absence of grave-goods clearly cannot bear the weight of interpretation that it has in the past. Other approaches, however, may be more fruitful in identifying, dating, and understanding the transitional generation in Scandinavia. Some late tenth-century Danish chamber-graves, such as that which produced the famous Mammen axe, show a combination of features which might suggest a society which has taken on board some of the habits of the new religion while retaining in modified form some of the old (Iversen *et al.* 1991). The argument that some objects with particularly pagan associations were missing from Mammen (the horse trappings and most of the weapons) and that some objects which were present might

indicate a Christian outlook (such as a wax candle, associated with the resurrection) (illus.6.1), may point the way forward in identifying (and dating) Christian activity. Further food for thought is offered by two chamber graves at Brandstrup, also in Denmark, ten kilometres southeast of Viborg (Iversen and Nielsen 1992-3). One male and one female grave have been excavated, the former with an axe, whetstone, and knife but no sword, the latter with a whetstone, knife, what is thought to be a coin in a leather bag, and a wax taper (of a different type from the Mammen candle). Looking at the surrounding region, the excavators Mette Iversen and Bjarne Nielsen have suggested that it is possible to perceive the following sequence: the last pagan generation may be represented by the full equestrian burial of the early or mid tenth century found on the same farm (Brandstrup I); the two chamber-graves (Brandstrup III), 300 metres away, may have contained this man's children or grandchildren - a transitional stage datable to the last third of the tenth century; their descendants were buried in a fully Christian rite elsewhere, presumably in a church, and are therefore not visible in the archaeological record as currently known.

The establishment of a sequence of this sort can help to fill out the picture presented by the written sources. Expanding our sample, however, demonstrates that there was more than one way for Christianity to be absorbed by pagan communities. Gunnar



Illus 6.1  
Drawing of wax candle from the  
Mammen burial  
(fig 15 Iversen, 1991, Length c.56cm)

Andersson has recently drawn attention to the variety of practice visible in rural cemeteries, in contrast to the uniformity which may be found in centres (like Sigtuna) more closely associated with the institutional Church. Andersson has argued that this physical variety in the countryside represents diverse responses to change, that is, different forms of accommodation with past traditions (G. Andersson 1997, 368-70). The cemetery excavated at Valsta in the Mälär Valley, for example, rather than demonstrating a sudden break, or a gradual transition from pagan to Christian, from cremation to inhumation, instead shows that, after the introduction of inhumation in the second half of the tenth century, the two rites continued throughout the life of the cemetery, until the middle of the twelfth century (*ibid.*, 360-3). The lack of separate zones for the two rites seems to indicate that the community felt no need to separate Christians and non-Christians (if the dead can be so categorised on the basis of rite). In addition, the burials were of a very eclectic character, mixing 'pagan' and 'Christian' features in a variety of ways. Andersson has argued that Valsta demonstrates the enduring strength of local custom, suggesting that it was not the conversion to Christianity but rather the advent of the parish system, anchored on local churches, which finally destroyed the older pattern of burial based on kin or household (*ibid.*, 369).

### Church Buildings

Churches with attached cemeteries offer the best evidence for Christian burial, but datable structures in Scandinavia are few and far between until the twelfth century. It is frequently assumed, and sometimes proven, that in the twelfth century stone churches replaced earlier wooden ones (P. Sawyer 1988/89, 482) - but is it legitimate to suggest, in the absence of excavation, that all the hundreds of stone churches of the twelfth century had wooden predecessors? Even then, the existence of a church building is not necessarily enough to prove the successful Christianisation of the community around it. It may have had little impact on the lives of the people. A story from another, earlier, conversion-period reminds us that Christianity, once planted, could falter (Brooks 1923, 236-41).<sup>7</sup> According to John of Ephesus (c.507-586), a holy man called Simeon the Mountaineer, wandering near the Euphrates River c. AD 510, came across a little church overshadowed with vines, and rejoiced. But 'when he had come up to it, he went in and saw that it was full of wood and stones and dust'. When questioned, the local people explained that it was not their custom to use the church or to have priests, because no man in the village had time to leave his

goats to learn to minister to the people. This community, therefore, had once been evangelised by a missionary, who had converted the population and built a church. But he had left, and no one had continued his work, and the church became a store-room. It is salutary to recognise that, in the archaeological record, this community would appear as certainly Christian during the lifetime of the building, thanks to the presence of an identifiable stone church. Only the written record demonstrates the very ephemeral nature of that Christianity. The story also reminds us that peripatetic missionary activity can achieve only so much. A settled Christian community requires a different sort of ecclesiastical provision.

### Runestones

Runestones comprise another important category of evidence in the assessment of the way in which Scandinavians received Christian influence. Thousands of runestones, mainly in Sweden, testify to the Christianity of their patrons not just through their decorative crosses but through their repetition of prayers, some of them with liturgical echoes of Anglo-Saxon and perhaps even eastern practices. As far as I know, the earliest datable example in Scandinavia of the association of a runic monument with Christianity is King Harald Bluetooth's crucifixion stone at Jelling, Denmark, erected some time after c. 960 and before Harald's death in 987 (Krogh 1982). Bibi Sawyer's work on the runestones of Sweden - over a thousand of them still in existence, mostly in the single province of Uppland - has attempted to make sense of their distribution, interpreting them as signs of social crisis provoked by the progress of the new religion (B. Sawyer 1991). The relationship of the runestones to old, pre-Christian burial grounds and to the later, Christian, church sites is much discussed in Sweden (Gräslund 1987; Andersson and Anglert 1989; Wilson 1994). Meanwhile, in Denmark, new discoveries have provoked new insights: I am indebted to Michael Lerche Nielsen and Marie Stoklund for details of their research into runestones in Denmark. In northeast Jutland, where the majority of the extant stones are found, restoration work in 1996 in the church at Bjerring uncovered an inscribed stone reused as a threshold stone in front of the north door of the church (Stoklund 1997; Nielsen 1997) (illus.6.2). The stone was carefully placed with the runic inscription visible on the upper face, and some labour was expended to make it fit into position; it bears a standard memorial-type inscription, without religious reference, dating probably from the second half of the tenth century. It is of course not unusual for redundant stone to be



put to use as building material; but the discovery elsewhere in the region of a significant number of runestones reused in exactly this way has led Stoklund and Nielsen to argue that something more meaningful is involved here. At Borup, another tenth-century runestone was found in 1995, also reused as a threshold stone in the late twelfth-century church, also face up in front of the north door (Nielsen 1996; Nielsen 1997). According to Stoklund and Nielsen, both of these large stones would have been fully visible to the church's users, as they appear to have been deliberately placed on display, with the inscription intentionally left showing. Why? Nielsen has argued convincingly that we have here a demonstration of hereditary continuity by locally important families (Nielsen 1997). Burials may have played a role in demarcating boundaries and proclaiming ownership in the pre-Christian period. The absorption of these family monuments into the Christian structure therefore may have been one way of continuing to manifest and display the family's position, adapting pre-Christian custom to the requirements of the new religion.

### Continuity with the Past

There are other possible overtones in the placing of these stones: we know from evidence elsewhere that one of the anxieties of the pagan targeted by missionaries was that in giving up the old faith he would be dissociating himself from his ancestors. The famous (and possibly fictional) disinclination of the



Illus. 6.2  
Runestone re-used as a threshold stone at Bjerring Church (Nationalsmuseet, Copenhagen)

Frisian king, Radbod, to be baptised and thereafter go to heaven if it meant leaving his ancestors in the other place finds support in other sources from the missionary period (Wood 1995, 263-4). Pope Nicholas I, instructing the newly Christianised Bulgars in 866, explicitly forbade prayers for dead pagan ancestors (Perels, 1925, 596). But Harald Bluetooth, king of Denmark at the time of the raising of the runestones at Borup and Bjerring, seems to have dug up his pagan father, Gorm, to allow him (against canon law), the benefit of Christian burial in a church built for the occasion (Krogh 1982). The emptied burial chamber and the disarticulated skeleton in the church are convincing as a physical record of this (otherwise hypothetical) act, which Harald may have performed in an attempt to ensure retroactive salvation for his father, or to bring something of the old religion into the Church - we can but speculate about his intentions. It is likely that only the wealthy had the resources to do this. Another attested case is that of two pagan princes of the Rus, Oleg (d.977?) and Iaropolk (d.978x980?). Some time after their death, their half-brother Vladimir was the first of the Kievan royal family to accept Christianity (c.988); in 1044, during the reign of Vladimir's son Iaroslav, Oleg and Iaropolk were exhumed, baptised, and reburied in the royal church of the Virgin in Kiev (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953, 139). This irregular act belonged to Iaroslav's vigorous efforts to build a structure for his enhanced authority, which was heavily dependent on dynastic prestige (Franklin and Shepard 1996, 208-17).

The reused runestones in Borup and Bjerring and the other Jutland churches do not necessarily indicate that bodies were moved as well as stones. But it seems that some attempt was being made in rural Denmark, as in Kiev, to link the pagan dead with the living Christians. In addition to co-opting elements of the pagan past this action demonstrated the continuity of local power - and the church building was considered a suitable site for that demonstration. It throws an interesting light on the early stages of the church's role in Scandinavian rural society. Another striking example of the linking of past and present has been identified at the cemetery of Valsta (G. Andersson 1997, 363-8). Three cist-graves were inserted c. A.D. 1000 in the top of a ninth-century barrow, forming a cross. The intentions of this burial - interpreted by Andersson as the identification of contemporary Christian families with dead pagan kin and the manifestation of continuity and social stability - remind us of Borup and Bjerring; this message is conveyed, as also at Jelling, by the Christianisation of a pagan monument.

## Sculpture

One last category of physical evidence, in addition to burials, buildings, and runestones, may help to detect and throw light on the change of religion: sculpture. In some areas of Scandinavian settlement in England and on the Isle of Man there developed a genre of sculpture which combined the Anglo-Saxon tradition of carved stone crosses with designs and iconographic motifs imported from the Scandinavian world (Kermode 1907; Margeson 1983). The conflation of elements has been taken to exemplify the converts' loose grasp of the new religion, putting Christ and Othin together on the same stone without recognising their mistake. More recent interpretation, however, suggests that the mistake has been the historians': this mixing of motifs has been re-interpreted as a teaching tool, employed perhaps by a sophisticated clergy to instruct the new Christians in cosmological themes through familiar images (Bailey and Cramp 1988, 101-3). The chronology of this sculpture in the Isle of Man and in parts of northern England is in the process of being refined, but dates in the first half of the tenth century have recently been proposed (Margeson 1983, 104-5; Stocker, forthcoming). In contrast, the potentially earliest Christian sculpture in Scandinavia is disappointingly plain: in Norway, a scattering of unprepossessing, lumpy, rather monolithic stone crosses, largely without decoration, are dated to the assumed early period of mission, that is, 950x1030, mainly on the basis of their unredeemed crudity of form (Birkeli 1971 and 1972) (illus. 6.3). They certainly seem to have originated in a context which lacked the technological know-how, not to mention the sophistication of imagination, of the Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture.<sup>8</sup> But crosses they are, and perhaps their very simplicity is informative, emphasising the relative poverty of the missions and their inability to command the resources which would have been required for the acquisition of something rather more up-market. Did the



Illus. 6.3  
The Tjovra cross from Rogaland S.W.  
Norway now at Fantoft, Bergen  
(Photo: L. Abrams)

earliest missionaries in Norway not have access to skilled craftsmen? Or was it that they adapted to native traditions so readily that they produced their sculpture in wood, which has since disappeared? It is in the magnificent wooden stave churches of twelfth-century Norway that we find the same lively combination of pagan and Christian motifs that characterises the tenth-century Anglo-Scandinavian crosses and tombstones of Northern England.

## The Pace of Religious Change

It has been argued, by me and by others, that Scandinavian conversion did in fact proceed slowly, and that the principal reason for this may have been that Scandinavians in general were not greatly moved to adopt the new religion. Later sources especially suggest that the motivation for change came from rulers who saw the potential of Christianity to serve their political ambitions, but who only gradually acquired the powers by which such a change could be imposed on the people. The Christian religion was certainly one of the tools used by tenth- and eleventh-century kings in their efforts to sideline petty chieftains, weaken local power, and create a strong, centralised, territorial kingdom under their dynastic, hereditary, rule. Later tradition is a very unsatisfactory form of evidence, but we do find in the kings' sagas, for example, images of stubborn adherence to pagan rituals in some areas. The agenda of such literature, however, does not allow us to distinguish between real religious conservatism and resistance to unwelcome political change. The response of pagan Scandinavia to the Christian message is much less easy to identify than is the use made of it by ambitious kings. Furthermore, in contrast to the muscular missionising of the saga tradition, archaeological evidence of continuity and adaptation of pagan custom may offer a less confrontational, more accommodating, model for the acceptance of Christianity (G. Andersson 1997, 370). In reality, Christianity, like the political change which accompanied it, probably made fitful progress, its ups and downs now blurred. Moreover, even once the new religion had been formally accepted and bedded into society through developing institutions, old habits doubtless died hard.<sup>9</sup>

Written evidence for the conversion of Scandinavia remains insubstantial; although relevant archaeological evidence is growing in quantity, it is still intrinsically cryptic and requires interpretation. Nevertheless, new discoveries, combined with new interpretations of old material, do suggest that progress can still be made - and that probing the evidence is worth the effort. In the early ninth

century, Vikings raiding western Europe ridiculed ascetic monks and dismantled religious reliquaries to sell, melt down, or give to the womenfolk as brooches (Dumville 1997, 10-14; Bourke 1993, 24-39); in the early eleventh century, Cnut, anointed king of England and of Denmark, visited the pope in Rome and purchased a number of special new pieces for his relic collection. There is much to contemplate in the journey from the one point to the other.

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## Notes ~~~~~

1. Sawyer et al. 1987 remains the fundamental starting-point for this subject in English.
2. The early date (Birkeli 1971, 33) derives from a postulated association with the Christianising activity, itself largely hypothetical, of King Hákon the Good; see Page 1981, 113-15. The later date is based on a dendrochronological analysis of timbers from the nearby bridge, on the assumption that the stone and bridge were put up at the same time (Hagland 1991).
3. For Anskar's papal charters (from Gregory IV and Nicholas I), see Abrams 1995b, 229-30. On the papacy's missionary interests and efforts before 900, see Sullivan 1955. For the 'feeble' and 'scandalous' popes of the 890s-1040s, see Ullmann, 1978, esp. 110-24.
4. See Abrams 1995b, 231-2 and 237-8, for Scandinavian relations with later popes, especially Clement II (1046-7), Leo IX (1049-54), and Gregory VII (1073-85).
5. On 'prime-signing', see *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder, s.n. primsigning*.
6. See also Blindheim 1978, 173-6, for the suggestion that Vikings raiding in the West were the object of missionary attention abroad.
7. I should like to thank Jane Stevenson for introducing me to this source.

8. There are striking parallels between these crosses and Irish and Scottish examples, very difficult to date stylistically but potentially belonging to the early Christian context of the sixth to eighth centuries. See, for example, O'Sullivan and Sheehan 1996, 248, and especially nos 939, 941, 946, 947, and 951? (figs 171, 174, 176, 177, and 181a, f, i, j, k), the latter from the early monastic site at Skellig Michael; also RCAHMS 1971, 109 and 153 (nos 270 and 301), RCAHMS 1980, 170 (no. 330), and RCAHMS 1982, 180-1 and 191-2 (nos 4, 15, 72-6) (from Iona). I should like to thank Ian Fisher for pointing these out to me. A connection between crosses such as these and similar monuments in Norway, as suggested by Birkeli (1971, 34-5), is not impossible, given the links between Norway and the Irish Sea region; but the cruciform style is so basic that there may be no need to attribute its appearance in Norway to the direct influence of specific models.
9. The English expatriate churchman Ælnoth (fl. 1085-1134?) admitted that the Danes turned against the faith when things went wrong (Gertz 1908-12, 83).

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## Christianization of Early Medieval Societies: an Anthropological Perspective

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Conversion of early medieval Europe may be discussed as a continental process or as a series of local events having their specific characteristics. Usual scholarly attitude in such studies concentrates on analyzing historical facts that are often supplemented by archaeological data. However, most of the publications lack general perspectives, i.e. some reflection on what was the reason for the spectacular success of Christianity.

I realize the difficulties with reducing the complicated history of conversions to a few general aspects. I know the reservations posed by post-modernist negative attitudes towards the building of models. I acknowledge that we should rather speak of christianities than of one Christianity and that pagan religions are very difficult to systematize. However, I believe that discussion of the past needs generalizations in order to make possible comparisons for the purpose of formulating our position in discourse and for creating visions of distant times.

Facing the lack of direct evidence left by pagan societies one must use theoretical achievements of cultural anthropology and historical sociology. These may help to understand why Christianity expanded so vigorously and rather peacefully among societies that lived on the fringe of the Italo-Frankish and Byzantine world. Certainly military expansion and coercion were not the most important factors and neither was activity of numerous missionaries. The reason should be sought in the strategy of local elites seeking ideological support for their geopolitical ambitions. They surely understood and admired the socio-technical advantages of Christianity seen in the visual emanation of successful states.

There are furthermore sources indicating some premeditated activity in introducing elements of ideology that seemed necessary for the establishing of stable territorial organizations. I have tried to list those advantages which were so attractive that they made pagan leaders promote the new religion even though it radically interfered with most aspects of social reality. In order to make my argument clearer I will first try to list basic differences between Christianity and European paganism:

(1) Pagan beliefs were **naturally acquired** in the social process of gradual education that prepared individuals for functioning in their society. Christianity however legitimated its doctrine by a revealed truth recorded in writing, which, like any other religion of the book, had to be **taught** by specialists.

(2) The mythical-symbolical world of pagans was not clearly separated from nature and people. They were all elements of cosmic stability guaranteed by the repeating changes which occurred in the natural world. It was ideology supporting **maintenance of the *status quo***. Christianity, with its normative regulation and vision of the final judgement, interfered with all spheres of human activity encouraging a drive for the **rational improvement** of this world.

(3) Time conceived as a coincidence of the past, present and future gave most of the pagan people a comfortable feeling of social and individual safety. It was **time reduced** to the cyclic minimum. Christianity introduced a concept of **linear time** that was also irreversible, finished and purposeful. Such concept of time had important cosmological consequences, forming a basis for a way of thinking that ordered visible reality in causal chains.

(4) With the process of gradual establishing rules of social cooperation (economic, military and political) these were seen as elements of the cosmic order. Gods discerned within that order were rather "domesticated" because they were connected by privileged relations to the kins and territories. They formed a sort of '**socialized**' **divinity** that was seen around, was tangible and commonly understood. Christianity entered this sacral pagan reality with a rather 'secular' concept of the terrestrial world. Material reality lost most of its sacral dimension. The **intangible deity** became invisible and generally inaccessible, and contact with it was reduced to a narrowly-defined verbal sphere controlled by specialists (priests).

(5) Pagan leaders often strengthened their power by **combining functions** of military-political leadership with religious leadership, e.g. celebrating of the main rituals. This reinforced their dominant position but, at the same time, made them responsible for the results of contact with the gods. In christian states, royal and priestly **functions were separated**. Christian rulers lost their former prerogative to conduct the most important religious rituals, which were now reserved for specially prepared professionals who took upon themselves

also the risk of explaining eventual lack of divine support. Monarchs could nonetheless control and manipulate functionaries of the Church.

(6) The natural 'plasticity' of the pagan religions was enhanced by the illiteracy of their followers: doctrines and even traditions were impossible to stabilize 'objectively'. Hence, pagan religions were eclectic and **unstable systems** reflecting changing power relations. Political success of a kin could swiftly promote its divine predecessors. Christian doctrine, stabilized in written form, kept its original content even after crossing long distances. This resulted in a relatively **uniform interpretation** of the universal aspects of human existence.

(7) **Polytheistic and decentralized**, locally changing and difficult to control, European pagan religions took shape during the evolution of societies comprised of relatively autonomous rural populations. They were part of a system of keeping balance between emerging centralising tendencies and the tradition of relatively egalitarian organization in these societies. Sacral legitimation of power was based mainly on the divine origins of kindred. Polytheism prevented the establishment of an unquestionable hierarchy with one paramount authority. During the late pagan period, however, attempts to create such authority by appointing a paramount leader of the pantheon, connected by relationship to the ruling dynasty can be seen in some regions. They were all attempts to adapt traditional ideology to the needs of increasingly stable central powers which sought divine legitimation for their dominant positions. The development of relatively stable political centres, aiming at superiority over larger territories, was supported by the creation of regional cult centres serving as ideological support for those who controlled such centres. Christianity, as a monotheistic religion, established one **absolute point of relation** for the whole cosmic order, making possible a similar organization of society with one paramount monarch representing unquestionable authority.

(8) Prechristian religions were **territorial and collective**, because they were shaped by traditions of local societies. Members of local societies were, at the same time, participants in locally observed cults. Christianity concentrated on **universal individual** salvation: relief from earthly suffering through a systematic plan of moral life which was available to anybody. This led to a consciousness of some interterritorial unity.

(9) In pagan societies **hostility** of inter-kin and extra-local relations was mitigated by exchange of gifts and/or potential to use force. Christianity offered **normative pacification** of contacts between individuals and of relations between groups, since social pressure strengthened the expectation that a Christian should behave correctly. This created a basis for creating a universal community based on a consciousness of identity that surpassed kin and locality relations.

We do not know how much social élites of pagan societies were aware of those differences that we can identify using our anthropological knowledge. But they surely admired concrete political results of conversion and realized its socio-technical potential:

(1) Pagan tradition based on collective memory and verbal transmission was rather difficult to manipulate, while religion taught through a didactic process offers the possibility for **conscious shaping of the philosophy of life**.

(2) Being a universalistic religion Christianity could not accept that some societies might have had their own 'truths'. Conviction about the moral weakness of a man left by himself justified the tendency to change the earthly world by **force**, legitimized by missionary goal.

(3) Organized, voluntary or forced conversion was supervised by the Church - an **institution** organizing (slowly) a uniform system of information circulation, collection and recording based on a common language (Latin). It was, also, the repository for Roman traditions and knowledge (organizational, legal, agricultural, architectural etc.). Church functionaries offered the necessary bureaucratic means for administration of large territories.

(4) The ideological influence of Christianity worked for relieving the tensions emerging between privileged elites and agricultural masses. For on the ethical level Christianity taught solidarity and patience, thus promoting not coercive but normative **pacification**.

(5) Christianity showed **high adaptability** that made it possible to fit the egalitarian doctrine to the social reality and to compromise with the earthly powers. It was advantageous that the lack of clear social cosmology enabled the hiding of contradictions between doctrine and historical reality.

(6) When confronted with the daily aspects of individual and social life early medieval christianity showed a **syncretic ability** to adopt many pagan traditions. Despite its universalistic zeal the Church accepted some local traditions thus achieving ideological continuity.

(7) The **legitimization of social inequality** was important. Already at the turn of the 1st millenium the Church accepted the tripartite division of society into *oratores, bellatores* and *laboratores*. Such a conclusion is supported by the letter of bishop Adalberon of Laon to Robert the Pious in 1027 AD. Similar ideas may be traced in the works of Alfred the Great and abbot Ælfric Grammaticus.

(8) The Old Testament tradition of the king being '*Christos Dei*' (anointed by God) established **sacral immunity of authority**. Already in the early ninth century Charlemagne had included in his imperial *intitulatio* clear formula '*a Deo coronatus*' with declarative invocation - '*in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti*'. This deliberate combination of Italian and Byzantine traditions placed christian rulers above the human law. Anointment by a bishop, started in Spain with Wamba's coronation in 672, slowly replaced the recalling of divine origin of pagan ancestors.

Hence, conversion offered political leaders reinforcement and stabilization of their power as well as 'diplomatic' acceptance among Christian monarchs. It promoted deep change of official ideology and subsequent christianization of subject populations. This was made easier because of pagan pragmatism which accepted differences in local religious systems and 'judged' the gods by their effectiveness in providing daily prosperity. Thus complex strategies of showing the might, opulence and advantages of the new religion often found positive response among pagans who were persuaded to follow their converted leaders with no need for the use of coercion.

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